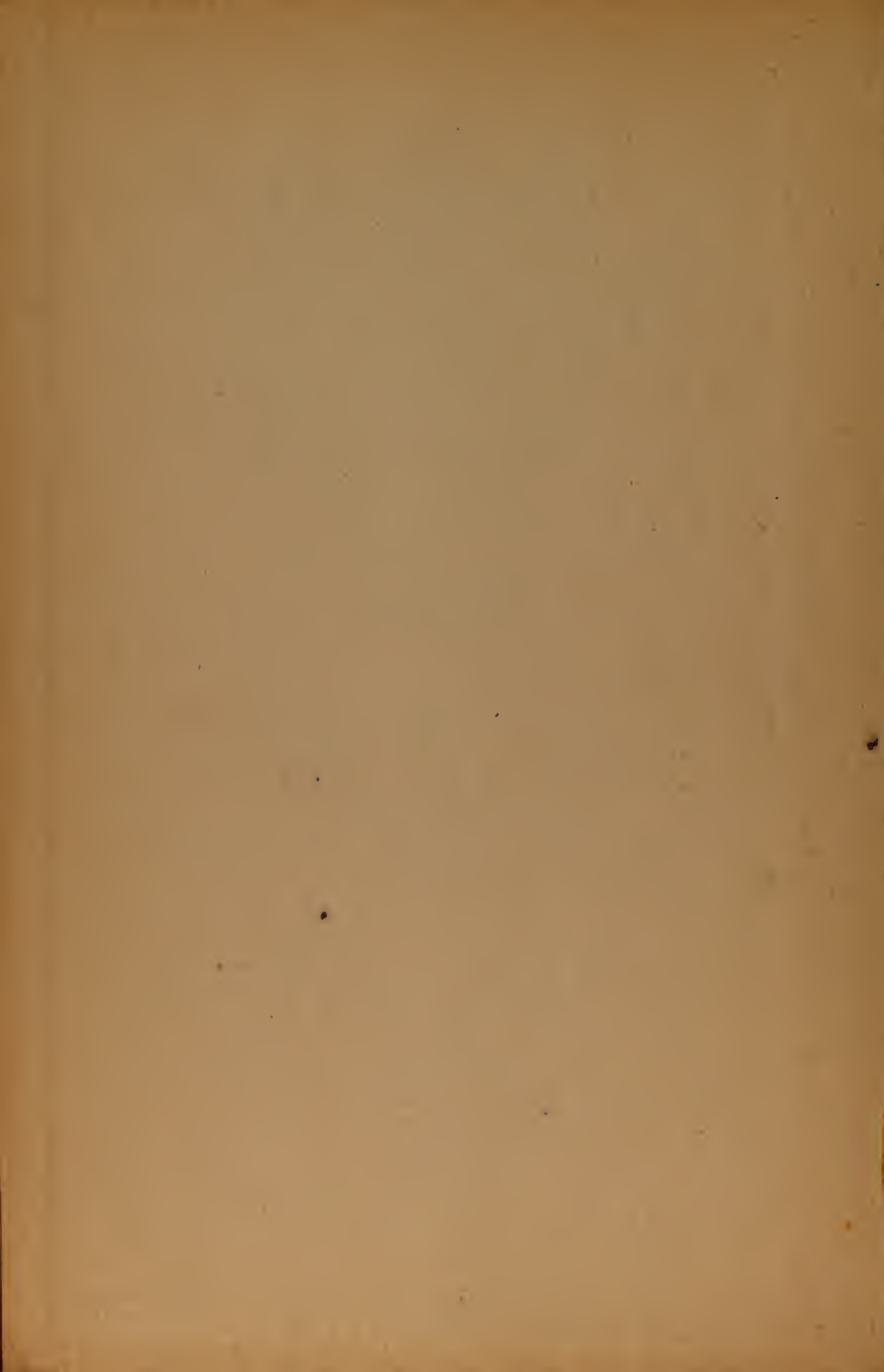
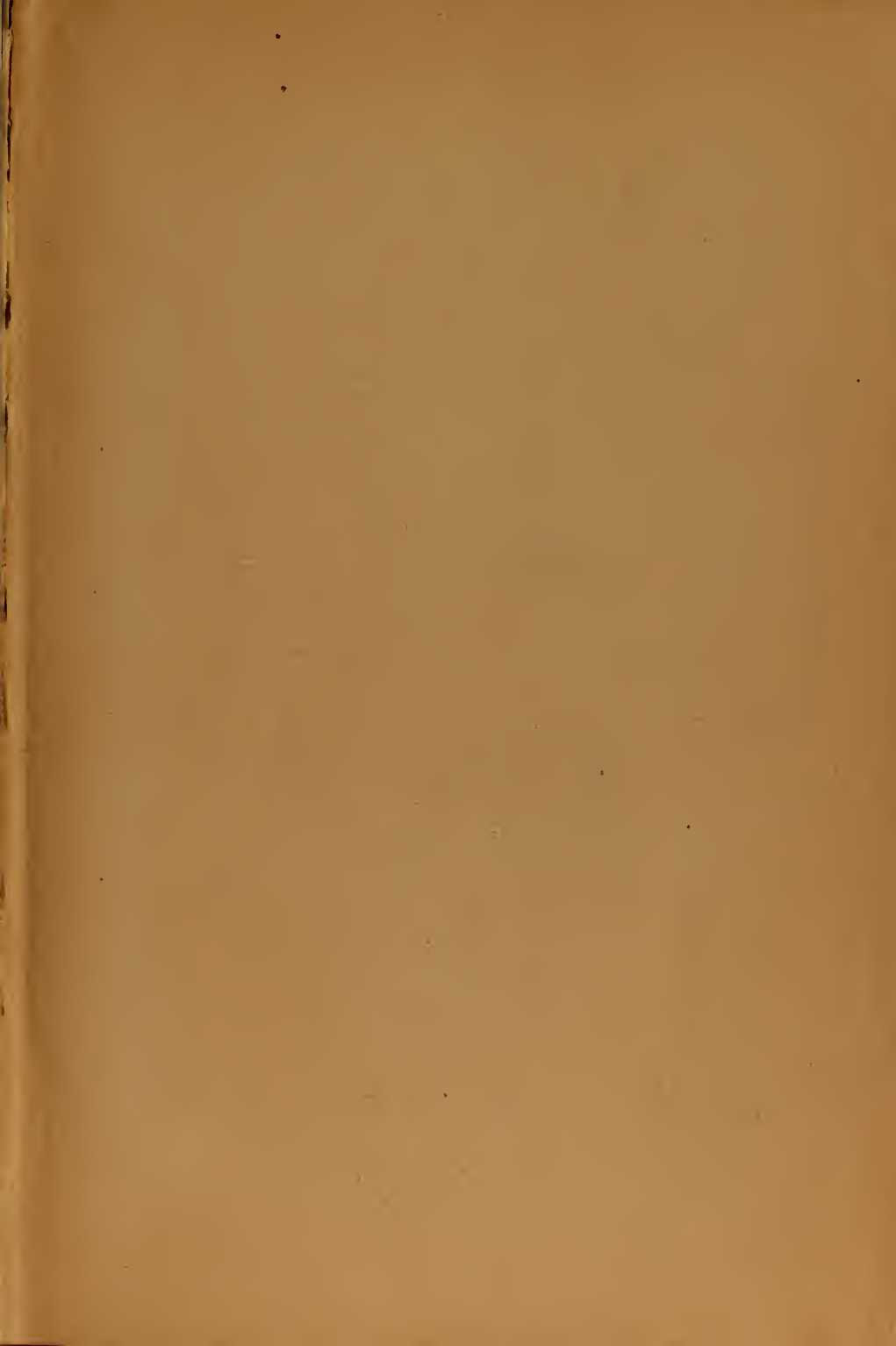








*She was nervously pouring a liquid from a small vial
into a cloth.*

THE BLACK BOX

By THELMA LIENTZ



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THE BLACK BOX

CHAPTER I

"REMEMBER Babs, we're to go immediately after last class tomorrow evening." These words were flung over the shoulder of Patricia Gordon, as she and her beloved friend, Barbara Hunt, parted on their way from school.

Both girls attended the high school which the small town of Bradford boasted of. Barbara was a Junior, while Patricia was a member of the Sophomore class. That fact, however, made no difference in the friendship that existed between the two girls.

Mrs. Bronson, a lovely little white-haired lady, had taken quite a fancy to the two young girls, and had invited them to her home, to spend the evening. She was a widow, and much loved by young and old alike. She had no children of her own, that anyone knew of, to bestow her love upon, so she gave it all to her many friends. People thought that some great trouble had come to her sometime in the past. There were a few who thought

her a bit queer. At times in the middle of a conversation, she would suddenly cease speaking, and a yearning, far-away look would appear in her dim grey eyes. She seemed to be listening to some voice calling out of the past. It would be for a few minutes, then she would quietly resume the conversation, always taking care to excuse herself, but never giving any explanations.

Barbara and Patricia were fond of calling on Mrs. Bronson and visiting her neat little home, which in the summertime, was surrounded by gay, old-fashioned hollyhocks, asters, and a great variety of flowers.

At this particular time, which was the day before the planned visit to Mrs. Bronson, Patricia and Barbara were parting on their way home from school.

"I hardly could forget, Pat, for we always have a perfectly lovely time when we visit her."

"Say," began Patricia, as she motioned Barbara nearer her side, "not that I'm such a curious mortal or that I'd go meddling in other people's affairs, but isn't it the queerest thing, the way she acts at times?" She ended with a mysterious sort of pirate appearance on her pretty face.

"She is a mighty fine old lady, Pat, but I have thought that her actions were a bit out of the ordinary at times. There are lots of people in the world

who have queer ideas and manners, so she may not be so different from many others after all. Perhaps she has been greatly troubled, but I'd never for the world mention to her that there might be anything wrong."

"No, I'd never be the one to mention it either, but wouldn't it be grand if some sort of mystery had happened in her past, and she would pour the entire story out to us, and you and I could—well——"

"Oh, Pat!" interrupted the thoughtful Barbara. "There you are letting your imagination carry you away, and some day you're going to flop to earth with a bang! It's none of our affairs what's happened in Mrs. Bronson's past, and—why, Pat! think of how she might feel if she thought we were meddling with her own secrets. It may not even concern a thing we would be interested in, and if she has never told older people, who are her friends, could you expect her to confide it with two young girls?"

"You win," laughingly replied Patricia, although she was not really ready to drop the subject just yet. "Just one more thing, Babsy, and I must be going, for I have a report for Latin tomorrow. You never heard even the oldest citizens of the town speaking of ever knowing of Mrs. Bronson having any relatives, have you?"

"No, and none of them seem to remember when her husband died, either."

"Well," sighed the other girl, "it's nearly four and I must hurry. Goodbye, and don't forget tomorrow after classes."

The two girls lived exactly one block apart, and they went down the street in opposite directions.

CHAPTER II

THE next afternoon, as Barbara and Patricia neared the home of Mrs. Bronson they could see her among the flowers at the rear of her house.

"Doesn't she remind you of one of those slender, old-fashioned hollyhocks, being kissed and softly stirred by the breezes?"

"Pat! You have the most vivid imagination ever was. There's not one bit of breeze to kiss and stir the hollyhocks, although I'll admit she does remind me of one."

"There! I've scored one point for my imagination and I believe I'll score more yet," declared the vivacious Patricia.

"There's not a person in the world that could become impatient with you, Pat."

"Why, you old flatterer. If you are not careful, I'll become conceited yet."

The conversation ended here, for Mrs. Bronson was coming to meet them.

"How pleased I am, girls, to think that you accepted my invitation. I thought you would, for I have so much confidence in my two girls, that I know I can depend upon them, unless the unexpected turns up."

Both girls were very much pleased with this—Patricia especially, for she felt that if Mrs. Bronson had so much confidence in them, she might even that very evening relieve her of her curiosity, although she flatly refused to call it that.

"We are always pleased to call on you, Mrs. Bronson," said Barbara.

"You certainly are quite welcome to come whenever you please," and she slipped an arm around each girl's waist.

The trio had by this time reached the little white gate and Patricia, who was nearest, swung it open, allowing the other two to enter.

"Oh, what a perfectly adorable porch!" exclaimed the enthusiastic Patricia.

At one end of the porch, an awning protected it from the early morning sun. Three small rockers with chintz back pads, and pillows, were comfortably arranged. An old-fashioned serving stand, that would have been a delight to any antique collector, stood in the center of the porch. It was adorned

with magazines, books by the world's foremost authors, and a dainty dish of home-made candy. Bright colored chintz pillows which matched the chair covers were strewn here and there. Everything wore the appearance of comfort and good taste.

"It certainly is," said Barbara.

"I am glad that it has met with your approval," smiled Mrs. Bronson. "I, myself, think it much nicer to sit here than inside when the weather permits."

Barbara felt guilty that she and Patricia had ever become curious over this sweet old lady's affairs. But Patricia was only wishing she could innocently turn the subject of conversation to some clue of what she termed as "the mystery."

"You never get lonesome, do you, Mrs. Bronson?"

"Oh, no. I did at first, after the death of my husband, but with my many kind friends, flowers, and two dear girls, I have overcome that."

A sweet smile from Mrs. Bronson, and a reproachful look from Barbara, made Patricia sorry she had not been able to overcome her curiosity.

"Oh, yes, girls, I have a newspaper clipping you might be interested in reading. If you will excuse me a few moments I shall get it for you." She arose and entered the house.

As soon as her light footsteps had died away Patricia whispered to Barbara, "Babs, I'm terribly sorry

I let my curiosity have the best of me that time, and I promise to be careful and not let it happen again."

"All right, but do be careful. Don't question her like that any more, dear."

In a short while, Mrs. Bronson made her reappearance in the doorway. In her hands she held a heavy black box.

"I'm sorry, girls, that I kept you waiting so long, but I can't seem to recall just where I put that article. I thought it might be in this box and in order not to keep you waiting so long, I brought it out here."

Sitting down in her rocker, Mrs. Bronson placed the box on her lap. Touching a small concealed spring, the lid suddenly flew back. A look of disappointment flooded Patricia's face. All that the box seemed to contain was old newspaper clippings. Some were so very old that they had become yellow. Others had fallen apart.

Mrs. Bronson proceeded to look through the papers. She was looking at something which she held in her hand, more closely. From where she sat, Barbara could not tell what it was. Suddenly she uttered a muffled cry and fell back in the chair, closing her eyes. Patricia rubbed her hands, while Barbara ran to the kitchen for water. When Mrs. Bronson revived, she had that far-away look in her

eyes. Something had come out of the past and was haunting her.

"Girls," Mrs. Bronson spoke barely above a whisper. "I'm going to tell you something, but not tonight. I've never mentioned it to anyone else before because—well, I knew it to be of no use. But I shall tell you this much," as she held a picture of a small, light, curly-haired boy, for them to view. "This sweet face you see is the picture of a two-year-old boy that was once mine. When you come again I shall tell you all about him." Quietly she kissed the features of the picture, and with motherly love, gently placed it back into the black box. That black box was going to mean more than either Patricia or Barbara had any idea.

"If you are ready, I believe it is about time we were eating the six o'clock dinner which I have prepared for you."

They arose and entered the neat little house. Neither the picture or the newspaper clipping was mentioned once during the meal.

Having washed the dishes and put them in their proper places, the three people retired once again to the pleasant porch.

The dazzling beauty of the moon shining upon the surroundings fairly took Patricia's and Barbara's breath. They sat motionless for a few minutes.

"Is it always like this? I mean is it always beautiful here at night?" queried Barbara.

"Yes," replied Mrs. Bronson. "More so in summer than in winter."

The little party talked on until eight-thirty, when Barbara reminded Patricia of school the following day. Thanking Mrs. Bronson for the delightful time, the two girls started on their homeward way.

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked Patricia with a note of triumph in her voice.

"Well, I guess your imagination has scored another point this time; for she did confide in us some, and I think she is going to tell us some more yet."

When they had reached their parting place, Patricia exclaimed, "I just know I won't sleep a wink and if we can help dear Mrs. Bronson with her troubles, I'm certainly going the limit."

"I'm with you, Pat."

Bidding each other goodnight, they went down the moonlight street for home.

CHAPTER III

THE following afternoon as Patricia and Barbara met at their lockers which were side by side, Patricia exclaimed in a low, cautious tone, "Babs, after the next class, meet me here. I've got some interesting news to discuss on the way home."

"All right," returned Babs and both girls hurried to their classes.

Patricia thought of nothing, during the next class, except what she had to tell her friend. Barbara was curious as to what Patricia had on her mind. She knew it to in some way concern Mrs. Bronson, for Patricia always spoke in that tone of mystery, whenever she had found any clue.

"Well, let's hurry and be on our way. We can't be too cautious in a case like this." Patricia was frantically trying to lock her locker.

"I'm ready but wait until we get outside before you tell me." They reached the door and were soon outside.

Patricia looked all about her, then began in that same tone of subdued mystery. "I told you last night that I bet I wouldn't sleep a wink and I never did. I lay awake, turning my brain over and over, trying to find some reason for Mrs. Bronson's queer actions that could be connected with the picture of her dear little son." The girls were walking steadily and paid no attention to their surroundings.

"I never slept any, either," answered Barbara. "I tried but soon had to give up trying to piece it all together. Of course her son could have died, but that must have been years ago, and she certainly would have overcome her grief by this time."

"That's what I thought at first, too. But you

remember she said she never mentioned it to anyone else before, because she thought it of no use." Patricia had lowered her voice and now waited for her speech to take effect, and to give Barbara time to think. "What do you make of that?"

"Why, what do I make of what?"

"Of her not telling anyone else because she knew it to be of no use."

"Well, I hardly know," returned Barbara.

"Listen, Mrs. Bronson's son is living or at least he never died when he was quite as young as we think."

"Why, Pat, how do you know? That's perfectly ridiculous. You know very well that you have no reason to make such a statement."

"I have a perfectly good reason and last night when I couldn't sleep, I lay awake thinking. This is the conclusion that I have come to: Mrs. Bronson thinks that her son is dead. For some reason, though, she is not positive about it. Don't you remember when she was talking to us, she said 'she *thought* it to be of no use.' Somehow, the more I think of it, the more questions I think of to ask. I wish Mrs. Bronson would invite us over real soon, and finish telling us about it. Perhaps we could in some way help her." Patricia ended with a sigh.

"Since you have been talking about it, I thought of several questions, too, which should be settled."

"Well, I guess we can't do much good until Mrs.

Bronson thinks it best to tell us more of her secret." Suddenly Barbara's face brightened. "Are you going to the basketball game tonight?"

"I intend to, but I can't unless we hurry."

They quickened their pace and Barbara resumed the conversation. "It would be lovely if we could help Mrs. Bronson, and I really begin to believe that we have a chance."

The two arrived at their usual parting place—the corner.

"I'm going to spend all the time I can possibly spare at thinking up something to work upon until Mrs. Bronson can tell us something more," resolved Barbara.

"I am, too, but I certainly got a busy week ahead of me."

The girls had little time for the next few days to converse much on Mrs. Bronson and her story. Preparations for the annual school carnival were being made, and the two girls' time was practically all spent on preparing booths and carrying out other plans. At last everything had the finishing touches and was ready for the big night.

The carnival was a gay sight to behold. Gay and brightly colored festoons, confetti, and merriment prevailed over all. The booths, were filled to overflowing. Money, time and effort had not been spared

in making the party the success which it turned out to be.

CHAPTER IV

THE following morning after the carnival, which was Saturday, found plenty of tired, sleepy boys and girls.

"Barbara! You must hurry and get up now."

No response was heard from the sleeping Barbara's room.

"Barbara!"

"Is that you, Mother?"

"Yes. Hurry, dear, breakfast was over long ago."

"All right. I'll be down in a little while."

But immediately her eyes closed in peaceful slumber. How long she lay dreaming peaceful dreams, she did not know, but suddenly she heard the voice of Patricia talking to Mrs. Hunt downstairs and heard Pat coming up the steps two at a time, and Babs knew then it must be something urgent. A sudden "swish" and the door flew open. There stood Patricia with a grin that made one think of "Wamba," a character in Scott's "Ivanhoe."

"Oh Pat! I just knew you'd be over before I was up."

"Well for some reason or other I can't exactly remember a time when you got up before I. It may be that my memory is failing me." And she gave a laugh as she bounded over to Barbara's bed.

"I can't wait another minute. I've got to show you right now."

"Well—what are you taking about?" asked the puzzled Barbara.

"This," and Patricia gave her a card which read :

"Dear Girls :

It is getting near Fall, and if you do not come over soon, you will not get to enjoy my porch on a summer evening. I know you have been busy, but I shall be expecting you soon.

Yours,

MATILDA BRONSON."

As Barbara finished reading the letter she gave one bound and was out of bed.

"Why isn't it just grand?" This as she ran about the room looking for her clothes.

"Oh, not a bit of it."

"Say!"

"Yes?"

"When are we going?"

"Well, why not this afternoon?" asked Barbara, who had by this time found her clothes.

"Yes, that's all right with me, but I've got some work to do first, so I suppose I ought to go home and do it now."

"All right, but if you wait till I finish dressing, I'll see, and if Mother doesn't need me I'll go with you."

As the town clock wailed the hour of three, Barbara and Patricia were sitting with Mrs. Bronson on her comfortable porch.

"Yes, I was very fond of every girl in the college and if I am not terribly mistaken, all the girls liked me." Mrs. Bronson was talking.

"How long were you the dean?" asked Barbara.

"Well, dear, for three years—the three years after I met a young Sir Galahad whom I was deceived by."

"Oh," was all either girl could say.

A weary smile appeared on Mrs. Bronson's face.

"He was wonderful." She paused a few seconds before resuming. "It was a terrible disappointment to be jilted by one whom I thought to be the most wonderful man in the world, but like my other disappointments, they became only crushed memories. But you are two such wonderful girls, and here I am telling you something that does not interest young, happy girls."

"Oh, but I would love to hear of it, if you don't mind. Was he handsome?" asked Patricia.

At this, Mrs. Bronson's smile broadened. She was very much pleased to think she could pour her story out to two young minds that were so willing to listen to her.

"He wasn't so handsome, that is, he wouldn't compare with the young gentlemen of today, but he was so brave, and courteous and all that a young woman could hope her betrothed to be, but I should start from the very beginning if I am to tell you it all."

Patricia shifted to a more comfortable position.

"When I was the age of you girls, I was very carefree, and had a very imaginative nature. I would spend hours in the shade of an old oak tree, which was my favorite spot of seclusion, dreaming of a young knight being my lover. I could picture myself in the old days of King Arthur's round table, being wooed by the fairest of all the knights—the knightly lover of my dreams. Foolish little dreams, but young girls have always at some time or other imagined such foolish little things, and I suppose they will on through the ages. One day my young knight made his appearance in real life. He wasn't as handsome as my imaginative knight but was even more romantic.

"One day while sitting at the foot of the old oak, I was imagining a wild ride on a runaway horse. Just as I was being rescued by an unknown

man I opened my eyes and a young man stood smiling down at me." Mrs. Bronson gave a queer little laugh. "I believe his smile was what captured my heart, because I would have scolded him for frightening me, but I could not resist his smile. I returned the smile. To make a long story short, I found he was—Benjamin Donaldson." Tears were now in Mrs. Bronson's eyes. "Girls, you can't understand what it is to have the man of your dreams suddenly come to life and then deceive you. He and his parents had recently moved to the estate adjoining our own. A short while after our first meeting, he accompanied me to a party, and from that time on our lives were filled with love for each other. Our meeting place was the old well on the hill between the two estates. Little missives of love or a small bouquet would await me at the foot of the oak tree every morning. My parents, however, thought me too young to receive the attentions of a gentleman friend, and forbid his calling on me. This made no difference, as we met in secret from that time on. Never once did he fail to leave the little note or bouquet at the old tree. He never once failed when called upon to help some good cause.

"One beautiful moonlight evening in June, Bennie, that was what I called him, and I decided that our love was too great to waste until I was old enough for my parents to consent to our marriage,

but to go the following morning to the next town, which was ten miles away, and be married. Everything was to turn out grand, and well I remember my joy that night. Sleep was impossible. I could think of nothing except the joy that was soon to be mine. I awoke early the following morning, and quickly and quietly dressed. I wrote a short note to my parents, telling them of our plans and that everything would be all right. Leaving the note on the kitchen table, I hurried to our meeting place. Benjamin had not arrived yet, so I sat down to wait. The dawn gradually appeared and still he had not arrived. My faith in him did not waver until the last moment, and after deciding that for some reason he was detained, I hurried back to the house fearing mother or father would find the note before I could reach home and destroy it. When I reached the house everything was still quiet. The note was undisturbed where I had left it. Taking it, I hurried up the steps to my room. Tears blinded my eyes. Suddenly something seemed to give way within me, and I cried until I was weak. My heart was broken. Neither father or mother ever knew that I had even left the house that morning. It was later found that Benjamin had left his home some time during the night, his parents not knowing where or why he had left. I have never heard anything of him, since he left me that night in June." A long

pause followed the finish of Mrs. Bronson's disappointed love affair. She herself broke the silence.

"I've never been able to find any reason why he should have left so suddenly. He seemed so eager in planning a way for our marriage."

"It must have been a terrible disappointment," said Patricia. "Although I have never had any such experience."

"And his parents, what became of them, Mrs. Bronson?" asked Barbara.

"The last I heard of them, they were still living on their estate adjoining ours. If they knew anything of Benjamin's disappearance they were very careful not to give any hint of his whereabouts."

"Didn't they seem worried about him?" queried Patricia.

"Yes, at first, then as the talk gradually ceased, they didn't seem to think anything of it."

"Mrs. Bronson."

"Yes, Pat?" this was the first time Mrs. Bronson had addressed Patricia as "Pat."

"Would you think Babs and I too—well—too mean and curious if, after you finished telling us the story of—of your little son, if we tried to see if we couldn't help you out?"

Mrs. Bronson looked puzzled as she said, "I don't believe I understand just what you mean, Patricia dear."

"Well, perhaps I didn't put it just right. Babs, you explain what I mean."

Barbara studied a few minutes, then proceeded, "Someway, Mrs. Bronson, Pat and I think we can help you with these disappointments you have had."

"I think I understand now. Three heads are better than one. But before we put two and two together, I think I had better tell you of the matter I spoke of before." Not waiting for further comment from her guests, Mrs. Bronson proceeded to tell them of her son. At first it seemed hard for her to find just where to begin, but once she had started, it became much easier.

"My husband and I, together with our three-year-old son, and my sister-in-law, were on our way to visit my parents who lived in Massachusetts. Our home was in Illinois. We had stopped at a hotel to spend the night. I was tired and would have preferred to retire but to please Mr. Bronson, I walked to the park with him, having left the baby in the care of my sister-in-law, Mary. Mary was a good girl, but not quite the dependable kind. Not that she couldn't be trusted, but she was too carefree to have any responsibility, especially where children were concerned.

"The baby was sleeping soundly, so Mr. Bronson and I left for the park. It was a beautiful evening in the latter part of July. The walk really did rest

me and Jeremiah noticed it. We would have rested there in that pretty little park, but I was always anxious to get back to my baby.

"Suddenly a terribly loud clangor split the air. In a few seconds people began running from their homes and starting down the streets. I had no idea what had happened but Mr. Bronson finally succeeded in halting a young girl, who told him there was a bad fire—the hotel."

Mrs. Bronson leaned slightly forward. Her voice held the same calm tone as when she had started. "I do not know how I reached the hotel but when I did—oh God, what a sight it was for a mother to see, who had left her child sleeping in that very building. The entire structure was in flames. It looked for all the world like a huge, fiery furnace, whose flames had reached out and enclosed my baby. I did not know what I was doing, only that I cared for nothing except to hurl myself into the flames where I could die with my child. Jeremiah tried to comfort me with the thought that Mary had the baby safe somewhere with her. This was the only hope I had.

When no sign of little Donald nor of Mary could be found, I collapsed and was carried to the home of a kind man and his wife who cared for Jeremiah and me. It was learned the next morning after the fire that a young girl about the age of seventeen or

eighteen had left the hotel a short while before the fire had started. She was then seen to return, after the fire had broken out, and before the action could be prevented, she rushed into the building where she no doubt perished. I have always thought that for some reason Mary left the baby, but when she returned and found the hotel on fire, true to her duty, made a desperate attempt to rescue him and herself perished in the flames. It was terribly hard on Jeremiah to lose two loved ones, both in one short—short, but yet a long evening. There were two others beside Mary and little Donald whose lives were never accounted for in the fire. When I was strong enough we resumed our journey to Massachusetts. A journey that before was one of happiness, was now one of sorrow, and where there had been four happy lives, there were two whose lives were saddened and filled with sorrow. We had nothing to prove that our son was dead, but neither did we have any that he was living. Just two years later Jeremiah died and I was left alone in the world. I moved back here to the old place where I have lived since,” and Mrs. Bronson wanly smiled as she looked about the place.

“Even yet, at times, I can hear little Donald saying the little babyish things he used to say. Only now he would be a man—a man if he were living.”

She fondly smiled at the two girls. “And now,

girls, you can perhaps understand what your companionship means to my lonely and sore heart—but the wound in my heart is most healed now.”

Barbara and Patricia had both been crying.

“How long has it been?” asked Patricia.

“Well, now let’s see. It will be exactly twenty-seven years ago this coming July.”

“And your son being three years old at the time of the fire would make his age now thirty years, wouldn’t it?” interrogated Patricia.

“Yes,” responded Mrs. Bronson. “Thirty years this coming March.”

Patricia was on the verge of asking another question, but changed her mind as she glanced at Barbara.

Barbara had a mind of her own and understood that it was hard for Mrs. Bronson to recall the tragedy which had thrown a dark cloud over her life. She also knew that too much questioning was not safe.

Patricia had a wonderful imagination, and an ever cheery smile, but she depended upon the good common sense of Barbara even more than she herself sensed.

CHAPTER V

THE doors of the heart can shut tight on a secret, but there is a flood of relief, once the spring to those doors is touched and the secret shared with another. So Mrs. Bronson knew a great sense of relief after having told Barbara and Patricia that which had lain dormant in her life for so long. It drew the three together in glorious companionship, even closer than before. Happy, healthful days were spent together. Mrs. Bronson seemed much more youthful, both in appearances and actions. Neighbors often remarked of what a change had come over Matilda Bronson since she had had the companionship of those two girls. While others would look on close-mouthed but deep in their hearts were wondering if "Mrs. Bronson had given up the secret which they for *so* long had wanted to know, to two *such* girls." And all the while that Mrs. Bronson was "changing," Patricia and Barbara were also undergoing a metamorphosis. Their minds were being trained on the beauties of life and of nature. Mrs. Bronson taught them how and when to plant flowers to obtain the most satisfactory results. They talked over books, music and current events.

Mrs. Bronson was always eager to hear about the school life of Barbara and Patricia. Life itself seemed to hold a new "something" for Mrs. Bronson.

October came with its fall festival, an annual event in Bradford High School. November swiftly arrived with its cool evenings and merry days. Winter sports had set in but Barbara and Patricia still found time to visit Mrs. Bronson. Things ran along as smoothly as ever until suddenly a bolt came from such a clear sky that no one hardly realized when it had happened.

It was one of those cold, bleak December nights when everyone tries to shut the gloom outside and make the inside as bright and merry as possible. Only a few of the bravest citizens of Bradford had ventured to more than stick their noses outside the doors and then swiftly withdraw to the heat of fires.

Patricia was snuggled comfortably in a great armchair, which she had drawn up near the fireplace. Mrs. Gordon was busy with her mending. Mr. Gordon was out of town on business.

Patricia's eyes were resting on the open book in her lap, but she was not reading. She was thinking of Mrs. Bronson. A strange man had been seen in the neighborhood lately and Patricia did not like his appearance.

"I don't like to think of Mrs. Bronson alone on a night like this and a strange man 'hanging around,' " Patricia was saying to herself. She had no idea why she thought of the stranger doing any harm. He had appeared quite suddenly one afternoon and asked Patricia if she could "please direct him to a rooming house where he could have plenty of privacy." She had directed him to Mrs. McGivney's where he could have "plenty of privacy," as long as he never gave Mrs. McGivney a chance to talk.

The stranger was dressed well enough and showed quite a refined taste. Patricia had seen him once since that time, four days ago, and he had stared at her to the point of being rude. Perhaps that was why she disliked him.

Suddenly the telephone gave an alarmed peal and Patricia awoke from her thoughts.

"Yes, sir, yes. Yes. I shall call her," Patricia heard her mother saying. Then Mrs. Gordon appeared in the doorway and said that a gentleman wished to speak to Patricia. "Why, whoever could it be," Patricia was wondering as she made her way to the telephone. "Mother knows all the boys' voices and besides she said a 'gentleman.' "

"Hello."

"Hello," came a low voice over the wire. "Miss Gordon?" the voice held a note of contempt.

"Yes sir."

"A friend of Mrs. Matilda Bronson speaking."
Patricia was dumb with surprise.

"Mrs. Bronson has been found—er—a—sorely in need of help, and has called for your assistance." The voice paused, evidently for an answer.

A sudden fear had struck Patricia.

"If at all possible you had better go to her residence immediately."

"All right. Thank you," Patricia managed to say. Then a sudden thought struck her.

"Shall I bring another friend of Mrs. Bronson—Barbara Hunt?" she asked.

"I think not, Miss. The old lady has only asked for your assistance. You shall come?" Again the voice held contempt.

"Yes, sir, as quickly as possible."

The receiver at the opposite end sounded with a "click."

Slowly Patricia replaced the receiver.

The way the voice had addressed Mrs. Bronson as the "old lady" hurt Patricia. Suddenly she thought of the stranger.

There was no time to waste. One thing was definite—Mrs. Bronson needed help.

Quickly Patricia flung on her hat, coat and galoshes.

"Mrs. Bronson wants me right away, Mother,"

she called. "I won't be gone longer than necessary. You aren't afraid, are you?"

"Surely you aren't going out in this storm are you dear?"

"I have to, Mother. I think something terribly—I—don't know what has happened to Mrs. Bronson." And Patricia resolutely opened the door, bade her mother goodby and faced the storm.

"What a child," thought Mrs. Gordon as she resumed her mending, and turned the lights still lower.

Slowly and with much difficulty Patricia made her way to the opposite end of town where Mrs. Bronson lived. She dared not think of what might have happened to Mrs. Bronson, and it was strange that she had only asked for her, and not for Babs too.

Most of the people had retired and excepting for the snow it would have been terribly dark. Patricia noticed this and pulled her glove back to look at her watch.

"Ten fifty-three!" Why it could hardly be that late, she thought.

Suddenly something shot past in front of her eyes. A sharp pain caught at her arm and Patricia sank into inky blackness.

CHAPTER VI

"You say Barbara is in bed?" Mrs. Gordon was saying. "Why, didn't she go to Mrs. Bronson's with Patricia?"

"No, Mrs. Gordon, Barbara has been home all evening."

"But didn't Mrs. Bronson call for Barbara?"

"No, I am certain that no one has called this evening."

"That is queer. Mrs. Bronson had a gentleman call for Patricia to come over to her home, saying that she needed her."

"Well, it is queer but perhaps Patricia is still over at Mrs. Bronson's. Have you 'phoned there?"

"No, I haven't," answered Mrs. Gordon. "But I shall call and find out. It is one o'clock and I am terribly worried. Mr. Gordon is out of town and Patricia would not think of leaving me alone if it could be avoided. She would have called sooner, I know, if she intended to remain all night with Mrs. Bronson. Thank you very much, Mrs. Hunt."

"When you hear from Patricia, please call me, for I shall worry about you both until I hear," answered Barbara's mother.

"Yes, I will call you."

"Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

Fear gripped at Mrs. Gordon's heart. In a last desperate attempt, she called Mrs. Bronson's. She had expected to hear her own daughter answer the call, but after a few moment's pause it was the voice of Mrs. Bronson herself that rang out over the wire. Tired, but quite natural it sounded.

Mrs. Gordon was indeed puzzled.

"This is Mrs. Gordon. Is Patricia still there?"

"Patricia? Why, no, Mrs. Gordon, Pat hasn't been here since yesterday evening."

A sudden terrible realization gripped Mrs. Gordon. Her daughter had been tricked, probably kidnapped.

"Oh God! Mrs. Bronson, something terrible has happened to my daughter. I have no time to explain. I must notify the police immediately."

Mrs. Gordon mechanically hung the receiver in its place.

The police, were notified and hunting parties were swiftly organized. The remainder of the night was spent in searching, but no sign of Patricia Gordon could be found. Mr. Gordon was notified and he hastened to the bedside of his wife.

Barbara was unable to throw any light on the disappearance of her beloved friend.

"Miss Gordon was an intimate friend of yours, Miss Hunt?" Mr. Gordon had immediately after learning the facts of the disappearance of his daughter secured "Big Tom O'Donnely" to take the case. Big Tom was taking note of every possible clue. Surrounding towns had been notified.

"Yes, sir," answered Barbara.

"You know Miss Gordon's friends?"

"Most of them. No doubt all of them." What on earth could he be driving at?

"Do you know of any friend that might have some motive to trick Miss Gordon? Think! Don't answer too fast."

"No. Patricia Gordon did not have a friend that would trick her. Neither did she have any enemies."

"No enemies, eh? Well, Miss Gordon *did* have an enemy, or enemies, or she would not have had that telephone call last night." Big Tom's voice carried a convincing tone. "Do you know of any stranger that might have a motive to trick your friend?" The detective put emphasis on the word "stranger."

A sudden thought struck Barbara. "Why there is a strange man in town and Pat mentioned to me only yesterday morning that she did not like his looks."

The interrogator leaned forward and rapidly wrote in his small book of notes:

Stranger—Male.

Appearance—Unlikeable.

"Will you please describe this stranger, Miss Hunt, giving all possible detail? Remember everything you say may help to find your friend."

But Barbara needed no urging. She had been racking her brain to find something that would help to find Patricia.

Slowly Barbara began to speak, half closing her eyes, a process which seemed to aid her concentration.

"He was approximately six feet two or three inches. Well dressed. Light hair with a slight natural wave; small beady blue eyes." Barbara glanced at the detective and then resumed her description. "Dark eyebrows, the line of which meets at the bridge of his nose; rather small mouth, the right corner of which droops slightly; fair complexion. He is a willful man, with a strong character. That is all."

The detective stared straight into the honest clear eyes of Barbara Hunt. One eyebrow slightly twitched.

"How many times have you seen this gentleman?"

"Once."

A sudden reflex stirred the huge body of the detective. His eyes narrowed as he met Barbara's steady gaze.

"You mean to tell me you analyzed this man's character like this in one meeting?"

"Yes, sir—from across the street."

"Gad!"

After a brief pause: "Is there any more I can do?"

"Not at present, young lady, but if I call, you will help me?"

"Certainly, sir. You can depend upon me to help whenever I can."

Barbara made a move to leave.

"Just a minute, Miss. Where will I locate this man?"

"I do not know, sir."

"That is all. Thank you."

CHAPTER VII

THE detective studied his notes for some little time after Barbara had made her departure.

Finally he uttered a solemn "humph" and left the Gordon residence. He had questioned Mrs. Gordon all that her present state of health permitted, and now there was only one person left to see. That one person no doubt could throw more light on the mysterious disappearance of Patricia than anyone

else, except perhaps Barbara. And very little help Barbara had as yet been able to give.

"Someone's holding back. They know more than they see fit to tell," O'Donnely was saying to himself. "From now on they're coming across and coming across fast."

He walked with a swift steady pace until he turned in at a small low white gate, where his steps were slower and carried a thud of determination. As he glanced up a true smile met his deep gaze.

"Mrs. Matilda Bronson?"

"Yes, sir."

"I am Thomas O'Donnely of the O'Donnely Detective Service. You understand my mission?" Big Tom's voice sounded hard and cold.

"I understand perfectly, Mr. O'Donnely, but we cannot talk here. Come inside where we can talk privately," and Mrs. Bronson led the way to her parlor.

"You will answer my questions quickly and briefly, Madam."

"Anything that I can possibly answer, I shall."

"To begin with, you will please tell me exactly what you know about the disappearance of this young lady."

"It is very little I know, sir. I had retired when the 'phone rang. Upon answering it I found that

Mrs. Gordon was calling. She asked me if her daughter was still here. I informed her that I had not seen her daughter since the previous evening. Mrs. Gordon was very shocked at this and said that something terrible had happened to Patricia, her daughter, and that she had no time to explain. Being unable to walk the distance between my home and the Gordon residence, I called a taxi and upon my arrival, found Mrs. Gordon in her present state of delirium. That is all I know concerning the disappearance of Patricia."

"At what time did Mrs. Gordon call you?"

"Why—a—I can't say for sure, but I believe it was shortly after one. "

"Just how well did you know Miss Gordon?"

"Why, I knew her very intimately. We had become the best of friends and shared a firm companionship."

"What object did you have, Mrs. Bronson, in gaining this young lady's companionship?" The detective squared himself in his chair more firmly.

"I don't understand what you mean."

"No, I didn't think you would. Listen here, my dear madam, you had better get out with it now. What gentleman knows of this great friendship that you have nourished for Miss Gordon?"

"Why, I should think there are several men in town that know Patricia is a great friend of mine."

"Fine! Now what one or even two could have some object in tricking your young companion from her house at night and then kidnapping her?"

"I know of no reason unless—unless——"

"Unless what?"

"Unless it was for ransom."

"Now we are getting down to business. Please bear in mind that these questions which I am about to ask you are very necessary and must be answered."

"I am ready."

"Have you any money on hand that you could pay off a heavy ransom?"

"That is exactly what puzzles me, Mr. O'Donnely. I have not! I have property 'tis true, but that brings no great amount of money. I never have any great amount on hand, for it takes very little for me to live on. No, I hardly believe the object of this scheme to be ransom. I—a——"

"Yes?"

"It is something even bigger than ransom. That girl's life is at stake, but I believe her to be safe."

"Are you certain in thinking that? Have you any reasons for believing Patricia Gordon to be alive at this minute?"

"Yes, sir, I have!"

"What?"

"Her wit and vivid imagination!"

"What?"

"You do not know her or you would understand. She is clever, and any child as young as she, having the imagination she has, also has the ability for foresight, and then the wit to use that ability."

"I believe I begin to understand. And now we will go on with the questions. Do you know of a stranger that might have some object in luring Miss Gordon from her home?"

"No."

"Do you know of any stranger being in town?"

"No, I do not."

Very well, Madam, that is all for the present. Good day."

"Good day."

CHAPTER VIII

"WELL, I'll be—" And as Tom O'Donnely stood on a street corner, he slowly scratched his head.

On the street opposite of where the detective was standing a tall, well dressed man, ascended the steps of one of the houses and rang the bell. A few seconds elapsed and then he was ushered into the house.

"Yep, that's him," exclaimed O'Donnely to himself.

Seconds turned into minutes, and after a half hour had passed O'Donnely gazed steadily at his watch.

"Must be mighty interestin' business." Big Tom changed his position and waited.

One hour passed and from the house across the street O'Donnely's man emerged, readjusted his hat and walked down the street in the opposite direction.

In a short while Detective O'Donnely of the O'Donnely Detective Agency was sitting in the cool parlor of the house which he had previously been watching.

"Brushes, eh? What kind of brushes were they, Mrs. Crosby?"

"Why, floor mops, wall brushes, hand brushes and a complete line for various work."

"Did you give him an order?"

"No, I didn't think I could afford any at present, though goodness knows I need something to help with the housework." Mrs. Crosby finished with a sigh.

"What did he say when you told him you could not buy?"

"Oh, I told him when he came to the door that I didn't have time to look at 'em and if I did, I couldn't afford to buy 'em."

"He said that he had a free brush for me and

that he wanted me to see them even if I couldn't buy. Well, I was mighty glad to get that free brush so I let him in."

"Did he say that he would return in the future?"

"No, but he gave me a card with the name of the brush company on it in mighty fine printin'. He said if at any time I felt that I could afford any of the brushes to notify the company and a representative would call at my home. Oh, he was a mighty fine talkin' fellow."

"Would you please let me have the address of the brush company, Mrs. Crosby?"

"That I will be glad to do, Mr. Donnelly."

Mrs. Crosby thrust a rough hand into her dress pocket and withdrew the card presented her by the stranger.

O'Donnely looked at the card and then wrote:

Madison Brush Company
4302 South Wells Street
Chicago, Illinois

"He didn't happen to mention his name, did he?" queried the detective as he returned the card.

"Queer, I never thought to tell you sooner. He did show me a paper that had his name an' a lot of classy readin' to show that he was a regular representative for that brush company. Now let's

see—sure enough it was Mr. Wells. Fine name.”

“Good! Thank you very much, Mrs. Crosby, for your time and trouble. I believe you understand just why I have questioned you in regard to Mr. Wells? It all sounds well—but no chances can be taken just at present.”

“An’ you’ve found no trace of ’er yet?”

“Not a thing. Some folks over around Brownsville thought they saw a girl that answered her description in company with two gentlemen. Mr. Gordon and I went over, but the girl was a young lady that lived in Massachusetts and the two men were her father and uncle. Everything possible is being done to find trace of Miss Gordon an’ meanwhile I’m tryin’ to find some motive for the kidnàpping.”

“An’ ’er poor mother?”

“Well, Mrs. Gordon is bearing it very well, but she is still bedfast.”

“The poor dear.” Tears were in the kindly Mrs. Crosby’s eyes. “You will give her my love and sympathy?”

“I certainly will, Madam. And now good day.”

That night Detective Thomas O’Donnelly wrote an important letter to the Madison Brush Company of Chicago.

Having paid a visit that very evening to Mrs. McGivney’s boarding house, the detective had found that McKinley Wells was making his residence at

the house of that woman. Mr. Wells, so Mrs. McGivney said, arrived at her house two days after the disappearance of Patricia Gordon. He was a perfect gentleman, being very neat and careful concerning his personal appearance, and the appearance of his room. She had been quite sure that Mr. Wells had been in every evening that he had been staying at her house.

"Well," O'Donnely was saying to himself as he gazed at the wall of his room, "he certainly doesn't look suspicious and his actions are as innocent as a young kitten.

"With Mrs. McGivney on the lookout, I'll have a report if he leaves the place, then he will bear watching. As yet, he hasn't paid a visit to Matilda Bronson."

Meanwhile McKinley Wells was sitting in the front parlor conversing with Mrs. McGivney.

"If you will excuse me, Madam, I believe I shall retire." Mr. Wells spoke in a barely audible tone.

Mrs. McGivney bade him a polite goodnight.

That woman, however, was not the only person who heard McKinley Wells' goodnight. There were two others—a man of about forty who crouched near the front door and another very slight, much younger figure which slunk beneath the parlor window. The younger figure changed its position and crouched lower in the soft snow. The larger figure

had swiftly disappeared. Neither had known of the other's presence.

The night was bitter cold. There was no moon to cast its light upon the cold earth. The parlor light blinked out. Out of the darkness came the soft crush of someone walking in snow. In a few brief seconds two figures emerged from around the side of the house. Much care was being taken to conceal any tracks left in the snow. Both men were tall and well built.

One figure wore a dark heavy overcoat, the collar of which was pulled up close about his face, a dark cap, and high top shoes. The other also wore a dark overcoat, dark hat, but lower shoes.

"Not a word." This from the man wearing the dark hat.

The slight younger figure, crouching beneath the front window, could barely catch the words, so low were they spoken. Breathlessly it waited.

One, two, three minutes passed, and still the two men made no move as to leave.

"Ready?"

There was no answer, but carefully the two made their way down the dark tree-lined street, and slowly, even more carefully, a young girlish figure, clad in boy's clothing followed.

One block, two blocks, and three blocks, past the shipping yards, and the two men halted, looked

cautiously about and then disappeared as suddenly as if the earth had opened up and swallowed them.

A slight cry escaped from the boy-clad figure. The old abandoned drainage pipe! They had entered! Slowly the lone figure neared the pipe, withdrawing a flashlight from a pocket as it proceeded. Before entrance to the pipe could be gained, there was a small stream that must be crossed. It was frozen hard and thickly covered with snow. The crossing was not so difficult. The bottom of the huge pipe was filled with water. It too was frozen, but not so hard as that on the outside. A sickening moldy smell filled the old pipe. It smelled of decayed animal carcasses. The top and sides as far as the water line were covered with a thick coating of dirt and filth. Slowly the small figure moved on. Gradually as it progressed, walking became harder, for the water was not frozen. It was beginning to seep over the top of the figure's high-topped shoes.

"Will the end never come? How far, oh, how far does this go?" The little figure was talking to itself as it stumbled on. "It's worth it all, if only I find Pat when I reach the end. Poor little Pat. What she must have gone through." Softly the half-frozen boy-clad figure began to sob. Suddenly the sobbing ceased.

"Barbara Hunt! If you are going to help Patricia Gordon any, you've got to stop that babyish stunt

of crying. You'd better be careful or those tears will freeze anyway." For the first time, Barbara realized how cold it really was in the old pipe.

Gradually the bottom of the pipe slanted.

"This must be where the old pipe goes further underground. Dad told me once that no one really knew how far the old pipe was buried in one place."

The floor of the pipe was now dry and much warmer.

"I'd like to rest, but I haven't any time to waste."

Suddenly Barbara saw just ahead of her that she could go no farther.

"It can't be—it can't be." Barbara was thinking. But it certainly was—a door.

Swiftly Barbara switched out her light. Slowly and gently she tried to push the door—ah, it opened with little effort. She cautiously peered within. Carefully she listened. There was no sound. She switched on the flashlight. There was nothing but a bare filthy room. The same sickening odor was here as in the pipe, only stronger—much stronger.

Suddenly Barbara heard voices. They seemed to be coming nearer. Turning the light out, she crouched far back into a corner. Soon a key sounded in a rusty lock. A door swung open. Funny she hadn't noticed that door before. She had only been able to find one door in this small room—the one which she had entered. A faint, very faint

light came from somewhere beyond the door which had just opened. Three men came through the door, walked to the door which Barbara had entered only a few moments before, and disappeared, locking the door behind them.

Swiftly and not without caution, Barbara tried the door which the men had come through. It opened. Not making a sound, Barbara entered. This was another room! Beyond this must be still another, for a faint light shown under the door.

Barbara peered around. The men might return any time. The odor was not nearly so strong here as it had been in the pipe and the outer room.

By the faint glow of the light from under the door, Barbara could faintly make out various objects in the room. There was a low, wooden table bearing a small piece of candle on a tin plate, a spoon, and a knife.

Suddenly a slight noise broke the stillness. Barbara stood paralyzed. Then several large rats scampered across the floor.

"Horrors," thought Barbara, with a flood of relief. "The place must be infested with rats."

Once again Barbara's heart seemed to stop pumping. In the stillness she strained her ears to catch the sound. Someone else was in that room beside herself!

CHAPTER IX

At first stunned with the terrible realization, Barbara was unable to move. Then her eyes rested on a low cot. The sound of breathing came from that direction. She was now more accustomed to the dark and very distinctly she could make out the outline of a figure lying on the cot. As she moved nearer, as stealthily as a cat, Barbara was almost overcome with excitement. It could not be—oh—“Pat!” she breathed as she fell on her knees near the sleeping girl.

Could she be dead?

Slowly Patricia opened her eyes and sat upright.

“Shh—it’s Barbara, honey.” And she began to softly cry.

“Oh, Babsy, Babsy!” Patricia cried as she flung her arms around Barbara’s neck. “How—? Where? When? I don’t understand, honey, how you got in. Are they—I mean the men—here?”

“I don’t know if they are all gone or not. Three of them left by the door through that outer room. They locked it after them.”

“How long have they been gone?”

"Well, I should think about thirty or forty minutes—perhaps not quite that long."

"They will return soon. We haven't any time to waste. You say three left?—That is all of them that were here tonight. They probably left by the side door of the pipe."

"Why, is there another way beside straight through the pipe?"

"Heavens, yes. Just before you reach the door to that outer room, there is another door in the side of the pipe. It is the door to a tunnel that leads straight around to Mead's hardware store. Then you see that door there where the light is coming under? Well, there is another room beyond that, and there is a stairway that leads directly up to Smith's cafe. Now do you know where we are?"

"Yes! We must be directly below the main street. And the search for you has been mostly in nearby towns. At least not in the main street of Bradford!"

"Tell me, Babs, how is Mother and Dad, and Mrs. Bronson?"

"Your mother has been very ill, Pat, but she is somewhat improved at present. I think that at times she has really given up all hope of ever seeing you again, though she says she knows you will come back. Your father is quite well, but goodness knows the worry has been a strain on him. He has offered

a great reward for any clue of your whereabouts, and has hired a supposed-to-be great detective, but for my part—he's *some* detective. Mrs. Bronson is quite well now."

"Oh, it's been a great thrill, only for the worry on Mother and Dad and the rest."

"Thrill?"

"Yes! A real thrill. Think of the publicity, and everything. I suppose everyone will make over me lots when I get back—that is if I ever get back. Gee, I thought for a while they were going to amputate my hands, legs, arms and head one at a time. then I thought they were going to bury me alive, but nope, I guess I'm too smart for 'em. I guess when I get back to firma terra, I'll write a book on the 'Terrors of the Underground.' "

"Oh, Pat! How can you joke when you are in such danger?"

"Joke? Why, Babsy, dear, joking, humor and say, honey, my imagination is what has kept little Patsy from being dead right now."

"Pat! Have you gone crazy?"

"No, Babs. I am as serious as anyone could be, living in a dungeon like this and never seeing daylight! I can't even tell the difference between day and night except that McKinley Wells only comes at night."

"But haven't you been terribly frightened?"

"No, but I've sure been scared lots of times, especially at first. But they didn't help. I cried myself to sleep lots of times, but I soon got over that, too. Then there were the rats; lots of 'em, too."

"Who is McKinley Wells?"

"Why, do you remember that strange man that I told you I disliked?"

"Yes."

"Well, his name is McKinley Wells. But how did you ever get here, honey?"

Then Barbara told her how she had decided to follow out her own plans and had gone to the boarding house to watch for the stranger. Just as she was about to tell Patricia how she had gained entrance to the room she was now in, they heard the outer door open. Swiftly Barbara jumped over the cot and crushed low into the corner. Patricia lay back down and drew a cover up over her. Immediately a short stocky man entered and locked the door. He walked over and shook Patricia, not any too gently. But the supposedly sleeping girl did not respond to the shake. The man then walked over to the other door and fumbled with a bunch of keys. Having evidently found the right one, he proceeded to unlock the door, and then entered, locking it again on the other side.

After a few minutes had passed Barbara arose

from her hiding place and sat down on the cot with Patricia.

"Wait until he blows the candles out in the other room; then he will have gone upstairs and can't hear us talk, if we are careful," whispered Patricia in Barbara's ear.

It was not long until the girls were left in entire darkness.

"So when the men went out, you came in here, was that it?" queried Patricia.

"Yes, and found you, honey."

The two girls sat for a short while clasped in each other's arms.

"Tell me, how and why are you here?" It was Barbara who broke the silence.

"Well," began Patricia, "I had almost reached Mrs. Bronson's when two men grabbed me. They doped me with some kind of drug which they put into my arm with a needle. They also threw something into my eyes. I don't know how long I was under the effects of the drug, but when I awoke I was in this room.

"They think that I know where Mrs. Bronson keeps some oil well stocks which she has. That is what they are after, Babs! Trying to rob a poor widow, like Mrs. Bronson. The bonds must be worth lots. As much as I can find out they are worth millions. But Mrs. Bronson doesn't know

they are worth a thing. She told me one day that she had some stock that Mr. Bronson had left, but they were not worth anything now. There are several men in the bunch that are after them. McKinley Wells and Mr. Smith are the leaders. They have made all sorts of threats to do me harm if I don't tell where the stock is. I have no more of an idea where they are than they have. Yesterday, for it must have been yesterday if this is night, they threatened me with such terrible things that I lied and said that Mrs. Bronson had buried them with other valuables, because she didn't believe in banks. I have promised to make a map, showing exactly where she has hidden them. But, Babs, when they find out that I have lied to them, I have no doubt but they will kill me. They wouldn't dare let me go because I know too much."

"I can't stand this terrible darkness any longer, Pat. I'm going to have some light while we talk this thing over."

"Don't make it too bright. I couldn't stand it. My eyes hurt terribly now."

"There! I'll turn it away from us," said Barbara as she placed her flashlight on the crude table.

"And now, Babs, I don't see how you are going to get away from this terrible place. Your mother will be frantic."

"No, she won't, honey, my mother thinks I am

safely tucked away out in the country at my aunt's. You see I've worried lots since you disappeared, and Mother thought the change would help me."

Barbara saw Patricia's face plainly for the first time since she found her.

"Why, Pat! You poor child! What do they feed you?"

"Feed me? Why, they tried to starve me part of the time, and when they do give me anything to eat, the rats get more than I."

Barbara could only stare at her companion for a few minutes. Patricia had changed very much. Her eyes were larger and brighter, but that was from the darkness. They had a more staring look in them. Her face was thinner and looked dark and grimy.

"It's a shame, what you have gone through, Pat. But I'm going to help, and we'll both get out some-way. If you kept alive this long, fighting for yourself, both of us together ought to outwit the whole bunch."

"What worries me is, how are we going to make a map that will come anyway near deceiving them?" asked Patricia.

"Well, let's lie down and rest. I'm quite tired after such a night. In the morning we will work on a map that will keep them away long enough at a time for us to do some thinking. We'll not

let them know I am here, if we can help it. I'll lie on the floor in that corner behind the cot. Then if anyone should come in the morning before I awake they will not be so apt to find me."

"No, you won't sleep on the floor," protested Patricia. "You'll lie right here alongside of me, so I can know that you're really here and that I'm not merely dreaming. I wake up about every half hour and am always awake in the morning before anyone comes."

"Oh, Pat, I'm so very, very glad I have found you, honey, and you're alive and everything."

Both girls hugged close together as they lay side by side on the narrow cot. They each sent a prayer to the Almighty that would have stirred a man with a heart of stone. At last they drifted to sleep, embraced in each other's arms.

CHAPTER X

"SHHHH—Someone's coming now. I can always hear when they start to come down the stairs. You had better hide over in the corner. Lucky your clothes are dark."

Both girls had awakened at about the same time.

They had been awake only a short time, however, when Patricia heard the footsteps on the stairs.

A key turned in the lock and the same short stocky man who had shook Patricia the night before, entered carrying a tray. He set the tray on the table and then glared at the sleepy-eyed girl sitting on the edge of the cot.

"A fine meal ya' git dis mornin', Miss, for ta make da map. A finer one ya' git tomorrow ef 'tis true. I reckon you'll be goin' on a nice long trip after ya' make da map. Then you'll git ta see daylight."

"Now, that's mighty nice of you, Sam, to make such a nice breakfast for me. Of course I couldn't stay down here always, so I suppose it'll be best for me to go away somewhere after I make the map."

"Now, thet's a nice 'greeable lady. Ya know I hate to hef to keep ya here but da ya tink I could let ya go an' lose all the kayo?"

"No, I suppose not, Sam. If you will please bring me some paper, a pen, a pencil and a ruler I will eat my breakfast and then work on the map."

Sam immediately left and soon returned with the articles necessary for making the map.

"That's fine, Sam. Thank you very much."

Once again the man left the room, taking care to lock the door behind him.

"He's upstairs now. Come on and sit down. We'll eat, then get to work. We'll have to listen close though, or we might not hear him when he comes back, in time for you to hide again. Say, it's nice that Sam brought plenty of food for both of us. I've got more of an appetite since you're here." Patricia ended with a short laugh.

"Say, I'm nearly famished! I was 'most too excited to eat much last night before I left."

The meal was soon over with and at last the map was being constructed.

"The harder we can make it for them to locate the supposed-to-be buried valuables, the better it's going to be for us. You won't occupy quite such an important place in their minds. That is—till after they find out that you've deceived them." Barbara said these words as she held the ruler in place, while Patricia drew the line.

"Quick, Babs, I hear someone coming."

Barbara was soon back in the usual hiding place.

"Well, if ya ain't working on da map. Did ya enjoy the bre'kfast? I 'most knowed ya would. Say, I wisht I had time ta stay an' watch ya woik at dat, but I hafta get ta woik miself."

"Do you work, Sam?" interrogated Patricia as she made a pretense at studying the lines of the paper.

"Well, yes, but 'tain't none o' your business what

I work at." And Sam shut up like a clam. Gathering up the dishes, he placed them on the tray and left the room.

"Whew! What a relief that he didn't stay. Say, he sure got firin' mad when I asked him if he worked. Huh!"

"Now we've got to make use of the time until Sam, or whatever you call him, makes his appearance again."

"Oh, he won't come back again till evening when he'll bring my supper. None of the other men will come today either, for they know I'm working on the map."

But Patricia was mistaken for the girls did have visitors before evening, and unexpectedly, too.

"How many trees are there here?" queried Patricia, as she drew the crosses which marked the position of trees.

"Well, now there's one—two—three—there must be four."

"That's what I thought." Both girls worked on, but Barbara's sixth sense seemed to warn her of another presence other than their own. It worried her so that she glanced about, but decided that it was her nerves. Suddenly she turned and sat paralyzed with what she saw. Patricia must have become aware of something wrong, too, for she turned and also sat frozen with horror.

McKinley Wells had entered the room by a trap door in the same corner which marked Barbara's hiding place. He now stood in back of the cot, staring at Barbara with the look of a hawk that has just caught his prey.

Patricia's mind was working fast.

"Gee! You sure gave me a scare at first, Mr. Wells. Barbara and I are busy working on that map. It's some job, too. Come on and sit down." And Patricia resumed the map making. She seemed to ignore McKinley Wells' presence entirely.

"I would like very much for you to explain this young lady's presence here."

"Who? Babs. Why, she just washed down the pipe."

"Come on! I mean business. How did that girl get in here?"

"Well, now, just sit down so I won't get so tired watching you and I'll tell you how she got here. There! That's lots better. She was out hunting ostrich eggs for her grandmother along the beach, when a sandstorm suddenly come upon her. She sought refuge in the entrance to the old pipe but it rained so hard that she was washed straight in here. Now please don't bother me further as I have some business to attend to."

Disgustedly turning to Barbara, Mr. Wells said,

"Will you please explain your presence here, young lady?"

"Certainly, sir. It was by accident that I came upon my missing friend, Patricia Gordon. I was in the rear of Smith's Cafe when I accidentally brushed against something and suddenly found myself surrounded by blank darkness. I slowly pushed my way forward through what seemed to be a tunnel, until I entered this room by way of that door directly in front of us. I found Patricia working on this map. That was only a few minutes ago and I have been helping Pat with the map since my arrival."

"It all sounds very good," sneered Mr. Wells. "But if the rest are willing, you may stay in the same room with Miss Gordon, but only long enough to help her finish the map. And then—well some place will be found later to ship you both to."

McKinley Wells arose, found the right key, and left the two girls once again to themselves.

"Well——"

"Say," interrupted Barbara, "Did you know that door was back there "

"I should say I didn't. Whew! He sure did take me some by surprise. Now we've got to work hard and finish this map. Gee! They will more than likely put you in some other room after we get it finished. I don't see how we are going to plan to-

gether then how to escape. Oh, well, maybe we will have to let them send us away somewhere."

"Say, I wonder where that trap door leads to? I'm going to find out." Swiftly Barbara went over to the door in the floor, and tried with all her young strength to lift it up, but she was unable to budge it.

"I suppose it can only be opened from the other side," sighed Patricia.

They worked the remainder of the day on the map. That evening they heard voices in the other room.

"There must be at least eight or nine," said Barbara. "Listen!"

"You say Barbara Hunt is here too?" queried a voice in the other room.

"Yes. Came this afternoon. She accidentally hit the door in at Smith's Cafe. Looks to me like someone should have been watching in at Smith's."

"Let her stay there with the other Miss, till they finish the map. Then put her in the ground room. She's a smart one. Get everything ready so that when they finish the map we can get to work. After we get the stock be ready to make a quick run. You know where to meet to split the kayo."

"And the girls?"

"Huh! They'll be safe enough here. No one will ever be the smarter."

"Oh, Babs," sobbed Patricia. We'll be here till

we die if—if we don't get out while they're looking for that stock, 'cause when they find out we've fooled them, they will be right back and there won't be any chance of escape then."

It was not long before Sam brought in a tray with supper for both girls.

Having had nothing to eat since morning, they both were very hungry. They were also tired and it was not long until they were sound asleep.

CHAPTER XI

"AFTER having found his name and the company he was employed by, I immediately wrote a letter to inquire concerning the character of McKinley Wells. This is the reply I received this morning:

Chicago, Illinois
December 23, 1922

Dear Sir:

In answer to your letter of inquiry concerning the character and past life of one, Mr. McKinley Wells, we are pleased to give the following:

Mr. Wells is the son of the well-known Thomas D. Wells of Chicago. He is a man of exceptional ability and talent, and the Madison Brush Company

considers him one of their best and finest representatives.

McKinley Wells is a graduate of the University of Chicago, and since his graduation from that institution, has traveled extensively throughout North and South America.

Mr. Wells has been in our employ for the past two years and we have never found it necessary to question his character.

Hoping this will prove of some aid to you, to Mr. Wells, and whoever else it may concern,

I remain,

Mr. H. P. West, President
Madison Brush Co.

"So that seems to clear up Mr. Wells, somewhat. However, if any of his actions should at any time seem suspicious, he will be watched more closely. I have several clues which I am busy working on, but I do not think it best to disclose any of them at present."

Mr. Thomas O'Donnely was sitting in the library of the Gordon residence.

"I thought at first someone might be holding my daughter for ransom, but that does not seem possible after so long a time has passed. You are doing everything possible, Mr. Donnely?"

"Yes, Madam. Things are to be taken slowly in

a case like this. Remember, up to the present I have had nothing as a basis to work upon. I will say that I have some very likely clues at present. If there is nothing more, I think I shall be going, but don't worry, Missus. You're going to get your daughter back safe, and I believe soon."

"Oh, I do hope so," was all Mrs. Gordon could say.

That afternoon Mrs. Hunt came over and talked with Mrs. Gordon for a long while.

"Do you think the detective is doing all that he really can?" asked Mrs. Hunt.

"Well, it has been a hard case to work on, and I believe he has been doing about everything he can. He now has some clues, which he believes are worth while. He does not, however, care to discuss them with anyone until he is more sure of them."

"Well, I do hope they prove true enough, to bring some hope soon."

"I meant to ask you before, Mrs. Hunt. Where is Barbara? I guess I miss her more since Patricia is gone."

"Why, I sent her out to her Aunt Mary's in the country. She was taking Patricia's disappearance so hard that I thought the change would do her good. She likes the country so well. I think I will have Mr. Hunt drive me out tomorrow after-

noon and see her. I want to talk to Mary anyway, about some butter and eggs."

"Barbara will soon have to be going to school, won't she?"

"Yes, their vacation ends a week from today. It's going to be very hard on Babs to go back without Patricia, unless she is found by that time."

"I certainly hope I have my daughter back by that time. I do not feel as if I could even hold up that long, at times."

After Mrs. Hunt had made her departure, Mrs. Gordon sat in deep meditation. It had been harder for her to lose her daughter than anyone could realize. There were times when she felt that she could bear the strain no longer; times when her soul cried out for her daughter. But Patricia had been a real companion to her mother. They had shared each other's secrets, had helped each other entertain, and had shared the all-around good companionship that should exist between every mother and daughter.

The following afternoon, Mrs. Hunt in company with her husband, drove out to the country home of Mr. Hunt's sister.

It was found that Barbara had gone to spend a few days with a girl friend who also lived in the country.

"I'm quite disappointed that I didn't get to see Barbara. I suppose she is having the time of her

young life. I do hope she isn't still brooding so much over Patricia."

If Mrs. Hunt had possessed any idea at that moment, where Barbara really was, she would have wasted no time in hunting her. And Barbara certainly was having the time of her young life, but in an altogether different way from what her mother was thinking.

CHAPTER XII

Two days had been required to complete the map. Deep, but clear thinking had also been a necessity to make it the puzzle which it turned out to be.

After having studied the map for some little time, McKinley Wells, Sam, and six or seven other men (according to Barbara's estimation) began the task of preparing tools in readiness for the search for Mrs. Bronson's oil well stock. Sam, in obedience to orders heard from the adjoining room, barred every door on both the outside and inside with the exceptions of the door leading to the drainage pipe. Men could be heard talking excitedly in the room adjoining that where the girls were prisoners.

"Pat!" exclaimed Barbara, "Who—do you know who that is speaking now?"

After listening to the voice a few minutes Patricia answered, "No, I don't know his name, but he's one of them that's at the head of it—one of the leaders, you know."

"I can't—be—mistaken—I know that voice! Oh! if I could only get a glimpse of him!"

"Who do you think it is, Babs?"

"Wait until I can make sure by a glimpse of him. I'm sure that I am right though. I'd know that voice anywhere."

"But who——"

"Patsy," broke in Barbara, "I'll tell you when I've made certain who the voice is."

Patricia knew better than to try to persuade her companion to talk further of the matter until she herself saw fit to discuss it.

The talking ceased in the room where the men were assembled. One by one they came through the door, entering the room where the two girls sat side by side.

Barbara leaned forward and waited expectantly.

When the man came through the door Barbara nudged Patricia saying, "That's he, just inside the door."

"Who is he?"

Barbara whispered something low, and Patricia uttered a short surprised cry.

"As far as can be told by mere study, the map

seems satisfactory. Some little time, however, is going to be required to complete our plans. That is, securing the oil stock belonging to the old lady. Miss Hunt," turning to Barbara, "it will be necessary to remove you from your friend. Sufficient food will be left in the separate rooms to last two days. By that time we expect to have completed our plans," slyly winking at the other men, "and shall return to dispose of you in some way. You need not bother to try escaping. Every door, with the exception of one has been double barred and no means of escape can be found through that one door." McKinley Wells finished this hard, discouraging speech, by giving a nod of his head as a signal to Sam.

"Are ya ready Miss?"

Barbara smiled wanly at the other girl. "You'll have to be alone again honey. Don't worry if we can't escape, we can at least die bravely." And with tear dimmed eyes the girls were separated.

Sam led Barbara to the door which led off from the old pipe. Unlocking it he roughly pushed Barbara ahead into the darkness.

"They's steps here Miss."

Slowly Barbara felt her way down the steps. Having kept account of them, she found upon reaching the bottom that there were six.

"I leave ya here Miss." And at that Sam turned and ascended the steps. A heavy bolt slid into place as the door closed and all was silence.

CHAPTER XIII

BARBARA had swiftly stuck her flashlight inside the boyish skirt, which she wore, before leaving Patricia.

Flashing it on she proceeded to examine the room which she must endure for two days—maybe more, maybe less.

The room was quite large, simply dug out of the earth. It was cold and clammy. The darkness, the stillness, the dampness—everything was uncanny. Something slimy slid across the floor. The place was a dungeon of horrors. The same furnishings were here as in the other room. Glancing up, Barbara noticed four 2 x 4's supported the earth ceiling.

With a sigh of despondency the saddened girl sat on the edge of the hard cot. What a horrible place to die in! For by now, Barbara had lost all hope of escape. Suddenly she sat bolt upright. The room must be directly below that which Patricia was in!

What was that funny scratching sound? Patricia listened again, this time straining her ears harder

than ever to hear. It must be coming from directly below. Putting her ear to the cold earth, which made up the floor of the room, Patricia listened. Again came the scratch, tap, tap, scratch tap sound. Why, someone was signalling by use of the International Morse code. Swiftly securing a pencil and paper, which had been used in the map making, Patricia wrote this message:

"Terrible place—Don't give up—Save food."

The ceiling was low and Barbara had climbed upon the table, placing the tin plate, which had held a stubby candle, against one of the 2 x 4's, she was tapping and scratching it with the prongs of the fork, thus sending the message to Patricia. The tapping was a dot while the scratching was a dash. A pause the length of three dots signified the end of a letter while a pause the length of five dots signified the end of a word. A still longer pause marked the end of a sentence.

"Afraid?" came back to Barbara.

"A little," tapped off Barbara.

"Hungry?"

"No," answered Barbara. "Save food—Take men four days—Food for two."

"Any escape?"

"None."

"Any hope?"

"Some."

"Dark?"

"Terribly—Keep track of time best you can—Must have some idea when men will return."

"Okay."

"Get some rest."

Barbara sat back down on the cot. After thinking a few minutes she arose, tore a piece of material from the sleeve of her shirt, and covered it over the scant bit of food.

"There's no rats and I can at least save it from those dirty bugs," and Barbara glanced down at the floor. There were lots of them, much slimier and more horrible in appearance than those generally found on the surface of the earth.

Fearing she might go crazy with her mind so occupied, Barbara felt her way to one corner of the room, placed her hand on the cold, damp wall and slowly began counting the paces.

"Thirty-nine!" she exclaimed as she touched the wall of the opposite end of the room.

"There would be approximately twenty inches to a pace. Thirty-nine paces with twenty inches to a pace would be seven hundred eighty inches or sixty-five feet. Sixty-five feet one way.

Before taking the other measurement of the room, Barbara sat down to rest awhile.

Rest brought thought, thought brought memories, and memories brought tears. Barbara was not

afraid—not for herself but for Patricia's mother and for her own dear parents. They would soon discover that she wasn't at Marion's, the girl they thought her to be visiting. Even now they might be searching for her.

She thought of a verse from the Bible. It was from the book of Matthew. Slowly she repeated it aloud.

"'Ask and it shall be given you; seek and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you.' Oh God, it isn't for myself that I seek but for those who are near and dear to me; those that must live on and bear the strain after I'm gone. Please, dear Father, fulfill thy promise to me when you say, 'knock and it shall be opened to you.'"

Prayer changes things. But before it is opened unto you, you must knock.

Once again Barbara began measuring the room.

"One—two—three," as she counted the paces. "Four—five—" Suddenly she tripped and fell headlong onto her face.

Quite a little while passed before she was able to turn over and think clearly. When she did she was unable to see. Something warm and wet was in her eyes.

"Blood!" she exclaimed.

In falling she had struck her forehead against a

projection of wood and in so doing had cut a deep gash just above her right eye.

Tearing a piece of material from her shirt sleeve, Barbara wiped the blood from her head, having first staunched the flow of blood as best she could.

"Ugh! Not even any water," she ejaculated as she looked at her dirty hands. What water was in the room must be used for drinking purposes only, and Barbara's face was dirty.

After the pain in her head had stopped, she was able to think more clearly. What had she stumbled over?

"Pshaw! I should have taken my flashlight in the first place. Then I could have seen where I was going."

Removing the light from the table, she flashed it on the floor of the other side of the room.

"I can't see how I happened to fall. There's not a thing here to stumble over."

"Why—what?" Barbara was kneeling on the ground. Her hand had come in contact with something hard and cold.

Turning her light fully on it, she discovered it to be a heavy black box. She tried lifting it but it was far too heavy. Barbara's curiosity was soundly aroused. What was that box doing in here and what could it contain? Probably nothing. She

made an effort to open it but this action resulted in disappointment.

"Locked! I might have known it would be."

Frantically she searched everywhere, but no sign of the missing key could be found. Once again she resumed her effort of measuring the room. It was approximately forty-three by sixty-five feet.

Barbara had no desire to eat. Especially with such surroundings. She knew, however, that she must eat a little or she would not have any strength. Sitting on the cot she nibbled a bit of dry bread and cheese, all the while staring at the heavy black box on the floor before her.

Patricia had been vainly trying to find a means of escape by forcing open one of the doors. With no tools to aid her, her small girlish wrists soon tired so that she was forced to stop and rest. She too was swiftly losing hope. As she sat wondering what time it could be, she noticed a light, almost white, bug slowly make its way out of the soil at her feet. Soon there were many wiggling around until at last they were free to scurry out of the distance of the light from Patricia's candle.

A sudden thought struck Patricia. "Why, there are thousands of them," she exclaimed. "Oh, if I dare have hope."

CHAPTER XIV

BARBARA HUNT was not the type of girl to sit down and wait to let the best opportunities of a lifetime slip by. Instead, she firmly stood by the age-old adage, "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again." With the same type of determination as Caesar held to reach success in his Gallic wars, Barbara examined the mysterious black box. Suddenly the lid flew back so swiftly that she blinked her eyes several times in astonishment. She had touched a small concealed spring and now the contents of the box lay open to her.

It was filled with papers. Moving her flashlight closer she picked up an official looking envelope, lying on top, and stared blankly at the outside. Up to this time Barbara knew not whether she should disturb the contents of the box or not. One glance at the outside of the envelope convinced her of the fact that whatever was in that one envelope at least was as much her business as anyone else in this wide world. Slowly and with benumbed fingers, she broke the seal. At the first line of what she read, Barbara's eyes looked wild and excited. At the middle of the page her eyes grew wider and her hair be-

same disheveled. By the time she had read the signature at the close of the document, Barbara looked the part of a maniac. A deep scarlet flush was in both cheeks. The terrible shock at first stunned her so that she was unable to move. She examined the remaining contents of the box. There were pictures so old that it was hard to discern what they were to represent. More official envelopes were there, but none held the terrible shock and keen interest, which the first one had. Far down in one corner, Barbara found a bit of pink perfumed paper. Inside of it was pinned several strands of wavy, golden hair.

"I understand it all now." After a brief pause, "Dear God, I have knocked. Now please grant that the way may be opened unto me. Pat and I must get out somehow, God, and it must be soon or it will be too late. Too late and there will be many broken hearts." Her voice trailed off into silence. It seemed as if the walls were closing in upon her.

Preparing her telegraph instrument, she sent this message to Patricia:

"Found very valuable documents—Explains everything—Got to get out, and very soon."

Thanks to her previous Girl Scout training, only

a few minutes were required for Patricia to translate Barbara's message, and send this one in return:

"Don't give up—Be out in short while."

"I wonder what she means by saying, 'Be out in short while?' Surely she wouldn't be saying that just to keep up my courage. Has she possibly found a way out?"

Patricia was making a slow progress on their way out. It was very slow at first, but was gradually becoming faster. After seeing the destructive white ants scurrying about, she immediately busied herself at catching them and baiting the trap-door with small bits of jelly. She then set them to work their destruction on the door. They were now working with great rapidity. Patricia was growing very tired but her hopes were so high that she could not bear to take her eyes from the door. Barbara, too, was growing tired, but the thoughts of her newly found discovery hindered her from sleep. All at once she seemed to realize that a queer sound had been dinning in her ears for some time. "Sounded like water running," she said half aloud, half in silence. Where could there be running water near enough for her to hear it? Suddenly with a terrible realization, Barbara knew what had happened.

"The flood gates!" she screamed. And even then

as she turned her light toward the only door, the water was beginning to seep around it.

"My God, I shall be drowned! Drowned! Drowned, in an earthly hell as this. The men, the terrible beasts, have locked me here and now are trying to drown me." All of the young girl's pent-up feelings burst out at once. She was a near maniac. She could not help but realize what a terrible death was in store for her. McKinley Wells and his band of merciless thieves had, upon their departure from the drainage pipe, opened the old flood gate and left the two helpless girls to die a horrible, pitiless death. Even then a small stream of water was flowing on the floor of Barbara's room.

Slowly the crazed girl sent a message to the ever faithful Patricia.

"Men opened flood gate—Water here—No hopes."

Back came an answer.

"Courage dear—Just a little longer."

Naturally the water would reach the room of Barbara before that of Patricia, for that room was nearer the entrance of the pipe and also lower than

the room where Patricia was imprisoned. The water had not yet started into her room.

Ah! The ants were making wonderful progress. If only she could help them a little, but she dared not disturb them for fear of interrupting their work. With clenched hands, Patricia walked back and forth like a caged lioness.

There were many things that were not clear in Patricia's mind. For instance, what did those documents, which Barbara had found, contain? But she could not ask in such a crisis as this.

"Filling up fast?" inquired Patricia.

"Room is forty-five by sixty-five feet. Water up to ankles."

"Oh!" exclaimed Patricia. "If the water is as high as that in that size room in so short a time, there is not much hope." She glanced at the door toward the drain pipe. "Still safe!" In desperation she looked about for something to pound with. Noticing the table, she sprang forward and turned it over on the top. Frantically she worked, trying to remove one of the strong legs from the crude table. A new strength seemed to have come to her. Pushing this way and that, she worked. Bracing herself with one foot and hand, she placed her other foot against the table leg and pushed with all her might.

Cr-a-a-c-k!

Patricia gave a complacent sigh of relief. With little difficulty she finished the removal of the table leg with her hands.

Hurriedly she clicked off a message to her companion.

"Have hope—Where's water line?"

Back came Barbara's message.

"Must sit on table—Water up to hips—
Don't hurry too much—I'm not afraid."

Barbara had gathered new courage and had been shaming herself for being such a coward. It was hard to keep up courage in a place like this.

Studying the situation squarely in the face, Barbara knew exactly how she fared. If Patricia managed to escape before the water entered her room too much, it would be quite a while before she could get enough help to save her. She looked down at the water. That would probably be too late.

CHAPTER XV

THINGS were happening fast at the Hunt and Gordon residences. Detective O'Donnely had gone to Brownsville to follow out his clues concerning the kidnapping of Patricia Gordon. About ten o'clock in the morning Mrs. Gordon received a telegram from him which read: "Working fast. Soon have your daughter."

Mrs. Gordon was so excited she could hardly wait to get the news to Mrs. Bronson and Mrs. Hunt. Matilda Bronson had paid many visits to the home of Mrs. Gordon since Patricia's disappearance. She was nearly as excited at the news as Mrs. Gordon.

That morning Mrs. Hunt received a letter from her daughter Barbara.

"Dear Mother:" (so it read)

"I will be home real soon. I have been having a lovely time, but will be glad to get back home to you and Dad. You haven't been working too much, have you?"

"Have you had any news of Pat? How is Mrs. Gordon and Mrs. Bronson?"

"I'm very tired and sleepy, so must stop. I'll see you soon.

"Lovingly,

"Your daughter.

"BABS."

A smile spread over Mrs. Hunt's pretty face. "Well, I shall certainly be glad to have my daughter back home again." She wondered that the letter had been typed, instead of being written by hand. Thinking that her daughter had used the typewriter for mere practice, the thought gave her no more trouble. She knew no definite time to expect Barbara home but she fairly flew about, setting things in order to welcome her when she did arrive.

Mrs. Gordon, too, as much as her strength would allow, was making preparations for her daughter's homecoming.

In the meantime, Patricia was making quite a swift progress in her effort to break the door, which had been weakened by the destructive ants. She pounded until her head swam with dizziness, and her arms ached and pained. Overcome with fatigue she would rest only a few minutes, then resume the pounding with the table leg. The water was beginning to slowly make its way into the room. She sent a hurried message to Barbara. She waited breathlessly for what seemed hours, but no answer

came from her companion. At the top of her voice she called, but only the sound of her own voice came back to her ears. What had happened to Barbara?

In a last desperate attempt, Patricia put all her strength behind a swift blow, which she lent the door. One of the boards splintered and left a very small opening.

Snatching her candle, Patricia peered into the hole. "It's clear through!" she exclaimed. Madly tearing at the opening with her hands, she thrust her feet through, dragging her body after her, down into the black darkness.

It was the middle of the afternoon and only three people were in Mead's Hardware. They were: a middle-aged woman, a young boy, and Mr. Jones, the one and only clerk of the Mead's Hardware.

They were struck speechless at seeing a young, bedraggled girl stumble toward them. Patricia was hardly recognizable. Her hair was matted and disheveled. Her clothes were torn and dirty. With hands and arms bleeding, she blindly stumbled forward. Having become accustomed to the darkness of her underground cell, the sudden brightness of daylight blinded her.

"Why, it's Patricia Gordon!" exclaimed Mr. Jones, catching Patricia as she fell in a swoon. "Bring me some water, quick, Harold," addressing the young boy.

The woman and Mr. Jones bathed her head and at last she revived enough to speak.

"I'm all right. It's Barbara Hunt. She's trapped down there. I think she might be drowned now. Get the police and men to dig her out."

The woman washed Patricia's face, hands and arms while the young boy and Mr. Jones went for assistance.

"We shall take you to your home when the men arrive, then you will feel better. Poor child."

"No, oh, no! I can't go home until Barbara has been found—dead or alive. I must show the men where she is, anyway."

The woman would have liked to have asked Patricia many questions, but checked herself and restrained her curiosity.

The two men soon returned with the police and a force of strong, sturdy men, armed with pick-axes, shovels and other such tools.

It was decided best to dig through the floor of the room where Patricia had been imprisoned, in order to reach Barbara. The room between that where the men were working and the entrance to the old pipe, had filled with water and it was necessary to re-enforce the door of the room where the rescue work was being carried on, against the pressure of the water.

After making sure that the work was well under

way, Patricia consented to be taken to her home. There is no doubt as to what a joyous reunion was between mother, father and daughter. Mrs. Gordon had been told that Patricia was found, but she had not been prepared to see her in the condition which she was in. Patricia was washed and immediately put to bed. Many friends called on her but only Mrs. Bronson was permitted to enter her room. The police were searching for McKinley Wells and his gang of thieves. Mrs. Hunt had lost no time in reaching the place where her daughter was trapped. It was a hard wait for her, not knowing whether her daughter would be found alive or—dead. The men worked hard and fiercely; digging in the hard packed dirt.

The news, as such news will, swiftly spread through the town. Hundreds of people gathered at Mead's Hardware store. None of them knew of the entrance to the dugout at Smith's Cafe. Only the workers were permitted to go into the underground room. Hard and furious they worked until long into the night, when a new shift came to relieve them. Mrs. Hunt could in no way be persuaded to go to her home. She wanted to be one of the first to see her daughter when she was found, and she must see that she was taken home carefully.

CHAPTER XVI

PATRICIA had been very restless all night but was resting some the morning after her rescue. She had gone through much in the last month and was weak and covered with bruises. She was half starved for the right kind of food. The worry and anxiety had been almost too much for Patricia. She had joked and called it all a thrill to Barbara, but it had been hard for her to joke about it. Hard for her to keep as cheerful as she had. But persistency wins, and once again Patricia Gordon was home, where everything was clean and where the food was good. And how Pat did love the sunshine—that was what Mrs. Gordon had called Patricia when she was a young child—"Little Sunshine." And now the sun was streaming in through the bedroom window, full on the young girl's pale face.

"How could anyone bear to shut the sunshine out of their heart, Mother?"

"I do not know, Patricia dear." Mrs. Gordon had remained near her daughter all night and was now sitting beside her on the bed, holding her small calloused hand in hers.

"If they had been in the darkness for as long as

I have, they would really and truly appreciate the light and sunshine when they found it again. The bright light hurts my eyes, but I couldn't bear for you to lower the shades." Patricia closed her much weakened eyes and smilingly patted her mother's hand.

About ten o'clock the rescue workers were overjoyed at having succeeded in making a very small opening through the bottom of the room. It was only a short time before they had made a hole large enough for a small man. Ropes were tied around the waist of one of the workers, just beneath his armpits. Care had to be taken not to step too near the edge of the hole or there would be a terrible cave-in. Slowly the men began to lower the ropes.

"Enough!" cried the man who had been lowered into the hole. A slight cry escaped his lips at what he saw.

Barbara had made a rope out of her leather belt, stockings and double strips of her shirt, and had tied them about her waist just beneath her arms, and with the aid of one hand was hanging to one of the 2 x 4's supporting the ceiling. In her other arm she held a heavy black box. Her eyes were closed, her mouth open, and her face cadaverous. Her lips were a dark purple. The water was nearly up to her waist.

Carefully the man caught hold the boulder and made his way hand over hand to where Barbara hung. Unfastening the belt, he caught her around her waist with one arm and shouted, "Give 'er slow." The men up above began to lower more rope. When enough had been lowered that he could swing clear of the water the rescuer called, "Enough. Hold 'er now." And holding Barbara closely, he swung the length of the rope.

"Puli!" he shouted as the rope gradually ceased its pendulum motion.

Mrs. Hunt was almost overcome with anxiety. She took her daughter in her arms as soon as she was rescued and was unable to check the flow of tears which followed. A mother always understands what is best to do at the right moment. She bathed Barbara's head with alcohol and held a handkerchief saturated with ammonia beneath her nose. Barbara was almost unconscious, but as soon as possible Mrs. Hunt had her removed to her home and immediately called the family physician. Like Patricia, Barbara was in a very weakened condition and suffered from shattered nerves.

"Where's Pat?" Barbara managed to say.

"She's home, dear, and is getting along fine."

"Don't let anyone bother that black box, Mother. Where did you put it?"

"It is safely put away, and no one will bother it."

Assured that her companion was safe and that no one would bother the box, Barbara slept peacefully.

CHAPTER XVII

Two weeks had passed since Barbara and Patricia had been saved. McKinley Wells had been caught, together with the other seven thieves, and was now being held for kidnapping.

Having been strong and healthy girls, Patricia and Barbara naturally recuperated quickly. They were still, however, somewhat weak.

Barbara had held a private conference with the Chief of Police of Bradford, and a hearing was held that afternoon at the jail. Barbara, Patricia, and their parents, Mrs. Bronson and Detective O'Donnely were present. But Detective O'Donnely was handcuffed with the prisoners, who were being held for kidnapping and attempted robbery. Barbara had identified him as one of the would-be thieves. It was the sound of his voice which had so startled Barbara during her imprisonment. Mr. O'Donnely confessed that he was an imposter; that he had helped plan the robbery, but had nothing to do with the abduction of Patricia Gordon. His position as

detective had permitted him to see that no one became suspicious of Patricia's whereabouts, and to keep a quiet lookout, and at the same time not cast any suspicions on himself. Mr. O'Donnely's real name was James O'Day.

When Mr. Gordon engaged Thomas O'Donnely to work on the case, by a very clever plan, James O'Day gained the position, only as an imposter.

The Mead Hardware, and Smith Cafe were owned by two men living in a city some twenty miles from Bradford. These two men were members of the gang of thieves, with McKinley Wells as their leader.

"How, and for what purpose were those rooms made at the end of the abandoned drainage pipe?" inquired Mr. Gordon's lawyer.

"Do you remember the old Thayer gang?" queried Mr. Mead.

"Yes."

"Well, John Smith and I are the two last remnants of that old gang. Those rooms were dug by Thayer to hide us from the law."

"Well, I'll be——. You've more crimes than one to answer for, then."

"I told you, McKinley Wells, that you'd be sorry of your bargain, if you tried to fool with those two girls," broke in Mr. Smith.

"All right, Miss Hunt," and the lawyer nodded his head at Barbara.

"When Mr. Wells and the other men were ready to search for the oil stock, I was separated from my companion, and placed in an underground room. A short while after my removal I accidentally came upon this." Barbara placed the black box on the table before her.

"That belongs to me!" protested McKinley Wells.

"True enough, but what is in it concerns several that are here." Barbara opened the box and removed an envelope. "This is addressed to Mrs. Matilda Bronson, but I have had permission to read aloud the contents." Barbara stood very erect.

"Mrs. Matilda Bronson" (Barbara read) "I, Benjamin Donaldson, alias James B. Gray, am writing this confession with much suffering and internal agony. I am near death. I sincerely pray that I may be forgiven by the Almighty, for the great wrong which I have done. It was for revenge, to revenge my love, but I now understand that no revenge should lead to such a sin as I have committed.

"You recall, but not with the painful memories, and regret which I have, that night in June long ago, when we were to meet and bind ourselves in holy wedlock. Leaving you, I went directly to my home to make the preparations necessary for my de-

parture. I had been there only a short while, when my father gave me a note in your handwriting saying that you did not care enough to leave your parents and home in order to marry me and that there was another man whom you could care for and not be compelled to sacrifice your home and parents for his love.

"Having read the note, I left home in the dead of the night, taking nothing with me excepting the clothes which I wore. My parents knew nothing of where I was. I wandered about from place to place for four years, when I finally succeeded in finding you, but you had married Jeremiah Bronson. I was unable to locate you for about five more years. Quite suddenly one day I saw you in a small town in Ohio. You were staying at a hotel. I watched, and that first night I saw my chance, and waited until you and your husband left the hotel.

"Everything seemed to be set for me. Your sister-in-law left the hotel to go to a news-stand which was one block from the hotel. While she was out, I went into your rooms and stole your child. Once again fate played into my hands. A fire broke out in the hotel and you thought your boy had perished in the flames. My game cost the life of one which I had not reckoned for. Your sister-in-law lost her life in the fire.

"I intended rearing your child, training him to be a first-class criminal, and then send him back to you. My object being, to break your heart in the coldest, hardest way possible, as you had mine.

"I have succeeded in making your son the kind of a man he is today. I have given him my assumed name—Gray. Do not try to find him, for it would break your heart to see what the innocent young son you knew has grown up to be.

"I am nearing death and before I can pass to the Great Beyond, I must make a clear confession. It was only a few years ago that I found that my own father had caused all these years of misery for you. He forged that note which he gave to me on our would-be wedding night. Had it not been for him, you and I might have enjoyed all these years together. It was too late, when I learned the truth, to reform your son, and right the wrong.

"I am glad, though, darling, that you who were once my ideal have ever been true to the end. I do not expect you to forgive me. How could a mother forgive a man for stealing her child, and then rearing him without any morals of life? But, perhaps you will understand and then when we meet in the Hereafter, we can know once again the love that was once ours. The love that has been ruined on earth by another.

"And now, my dearest, remember I shall be waiting—waiting for you.

"Goodbye

"Love

"BENNIE."

"My God!" screamed McKinley Wells. "It can't be."

"Just a minute," broke in Barbara. "Mr. Wells, I believe you have something to say."

"I—am—John Gray! Those papers were my father's, James B. Gray. He died only a month ago, and I, thinking they were of no importance, left them in that box in one of the underground rooms."

Mrs. Bronson had been stunned by Benjamin Donaldson's written confession, but now she suddenly came to life and flew into John Gray alias McKinley Wells arms.

"My son! Oh God, you've given him back to me."

There was not a dry eye in that room. Even the captured crooks blinked tear-dimmed eyes.

"My Mother!" The two stood clasped in each other's arms. "To think—that—I—would have—robbed my own—Mother."

John Gray cried like a child. It is hard to see a man cry, but these were tears of joy.

"But you didn't know. We have Barbara and

Patricia to thank for this." And Mrs. Bronson hugged her son even tighter.

"But, Mother, now that I have found you I must leave you—I kidnapped Patricia Gordon. My other crimes have been answered for, but I must pay the penalty for this one. But you wait, little Mother. I'll pay—for I'll know that I have you waiting for me and when I get out, we'll start all over again and I'll make good. I'm not all bad. I just knew no other way of making my living." Suddenly he stopped. "What is my real name, Little Mother?"

Her head resting on his shoulder, Mrs. Bronson smiled, "Donald. Donald Bronson. The Donald is after the last name of the man who stole you—Benjamin Donaldson. But why did you change your name from Gray to Wells?"

"I had a friend whose parents were very wealthy. His name was McKinley Wells. His parents did not wish him to work and as long as he lived with them they would not permit him to make his own living. At last he decided to go to South America—far enough away from them that they could not interfere with his plans. Mr. Wells asked me to assume his name and to take over his position with the Madison Brush Company. I was then making my plans to come here—so I came under the name of McKinley Wells and as a representative for the Madison Brush Company."

It may seem strange that Donald Bronson alias John Gray alias McKinley Wells, should turn from a life of theft and suddenly expose the heart of a lamb. But heredity is great, and Donald Bronson had inherited fine characteristics. He possessed his mother's good common sense, and the confession of Benjamin Donaldson had laid bare the sin which he had done. Mrs. Bronson saw plainly that Donald could not help but realize how true his mother had really been.

"May I ask a question?" Mrs. Hunt had broken the silence. The Chief of Police nodded his head in consent. "If Barbara was imprisoned all that time, who sent that letter which I received three days ago?"

"I guess I did that, too," spoke up James O'Day.

"That is all. Now I understand why it was type-written."

Donald Bronson was sentenced to prison from ten to twenty years for the kidnapping of Patricia Gordon. He kissed his mother goodbye and with firm determination faced the long years ahead.

CHAPTER XVIII

"I DO not know how I can ever repay you girls for all that you have done for me. Had it not been for you, Donald would probably have robbed his own mother and gone on with his crime, but now he knows he has me waiting for him after he serves his prison term and we can then start over together."

It was May, and Barbara and Patricia were sitting with Mrs. Bronson on her cozy front porch.

"I can't understand how it happened that the black box, which you kept the baby pictures of your son in, was identically like that which I found containing Benjamin Donaldson's confession."

"Why, that is easily explained. One year for Christmas Donald gave me a heavy black box as a gift. He had one exactly like it, and we promised to keep them forever and we both have. Though now I intend keeping them both."

"Little did I think when you told us last June about your son, that all this would happen," and Barbara squeezed Mrs. Bronson's hand.

"It has caused much suffering for both you girls

and your parents too, but it means so much to me to think that I have my son again."

"It's been a wonderful experience and a big thrill." Patricia sat in deep meditation, then suddenly a broad smile covered her pretty face. "Believe me or not, but when I went back to school a certain young boy came to me and said, 'Pat Gordon, you're the first blamed girl I've taken my hat off to, but you've sure got backbone and courage.' Then he shook hands with me. Imagine the captain of the Bradford All-Star Football Team shaking hands in congratulation with me!"

All three of them laughed and with a sigh Barbara said, "I wonder what will happen next?"

"Yes, I would like to know, too. Final exams day after tomorrow. Oh if I could only see far enough into the future to know the results, I'd feel better."

"You will be a Junior next year, won't you, Patricia?"

"Uh-huh, an' Babs will be a Senior."

"I can hardly realize that it will be my last year in high school. Just think how busy I shall be. The Seniors have charge of the Fall Carnival, the class basketball, the year book, and then there will be the Senior play, graduation, Baccalaureate, and just ever so many things to look after, besides the work to get your credits. After all that is over, then

comes the really big things in life, then is when you are really facing the world."

"You are right, Barbara. What do you intend doing after you graduate?"

"I have saved almost enough money from my weekly allowance to pay for a four years' college course specializing in Science. Father said he would give me enough more to make the correct amount, but I think I shall teach a year to raise the rest of the money."

"That is certainly a fine way to look toward the future, and your plans are very good, too." Turning to Patricia, "What plans have you in mind, Pat?"

"Nothing as definite as Babs', but if I can get the right financial backing, I intend to start an orphanage for stray cats and dogs."

CHAPTER XIX

"I'm so excited, I can hardly fasten my slippers."

"It seems almost too good to be true, I wonder if he has come yet?"

"I don't suppose he has, but do hurry, Babsy. I want to see them both when he gets there."

Donald Bronson, due to his excellent behavior

and hard work, had been paroled and was to arrive home that day.

Having at last finished the task of getting ready, Barbara and Patricia were on their way to the home of Mrs. Bronson.

"Doesn't she remind you of a sweet old-fashioned hollyhock, being softly stirred and kissed by the breezes?"

"Patricia Gordon! You have the most vivid imagination ever was. In the first place, there isn't a bit of breeze to stir and kiss the hollyhocks—though I will admit she does remind me of one."

"There! I've scored another point for my imagination. It was almost exactly a year ago that I said that very same thing and scored one point and now I've scored another."

"Yes, and when you said those words, we certainly didn't know what all was going to happen during this time."

"You know, Pat, in all the excitement that was brewing when you were kidnapped et cetera, I forgot entirely about Mrs. Bronson's son and the story she told us. Then, when I found that letter in the black box, I could hardly control my excitement, and now everything has turned out so splendidly that I can hardly control my joy."

"Barbie, I don't like to speak of it when you are so filled with joy and happiness, but everything is

ending too nicely for all the sorrow and disappointment."

"You mean that you think something is wrong, or that something is going to happen?" Barbara looked inquiringly into her companions's face.

"No, Babsy. I haven't the slightest idea of anything being wrong. It seems—well, too good to be true. It's just one of my queer feelings Barbie."

"Well, anyway I don't like to hear of you having any of those queer warnings, which you sometimes have. They are usually a warning of trouble."

"Let's not talk about it now; Mrs. Bronson sees us coming."

"Hasn't Donald arrived yet?" asked Barbara.

"No, but he wouldn't get here until rather late this afternoon."

"Aren't you happy, Mrs. Bronson?" queried Barbara.

"Happy? I should say I am. I wonder if my son is as happy and overjoyed as I?"

"I should think he would be," and Barbara cast an admiring look at Mrs. Bronson. "It's not every young man in this modern world that has a little grey-haired mother waiting for him. There's too many mothers that believe in grey hair restorer and such things as that. I like for them to enjoy the natural bloom of youth, keeping physically fit, of course, and then let the years put the white in the

hair and wrinkles around their mouth. I think wrinkles and grey hair are milestones of time. They are something to admire and—oh I could preach on my favorite subjects from now till Doomsday. And anyway, Mrs. Bronson, you remind me of that old song, 'Old Fashioned Garden.' "

"Thank you, Barbie. I am very glad that you admire an old fashioned mother. What is the matter, Patricia? You haven't said a word since I met you today."

"Oh, I guess I'm just in one of my thinking moods today; I don't care much to converse then, although I know it is terribly impolite."

Barbara became uneasy. She probably understood Patricia's moods better than anyone else, and still at times she herself could not understand her.

There had only been two times before, that Barbara could remember, when Patricia had been in one of her thinking moods and refused to talk. One time was in the departmental grades when someone had stolen some final examination papers; the other time was when Mr. Gordon's car was stolen. There had been much trouble both times; and here Pat was having another at such a time when they should all be so happy.

The trio had been silently sitting on the porch for some time. With a deep frown on her forehead,

Mrs. Bronson looked at Patricia and said, "I don't believe you feel well, do you, Pat?"

"Oh, yes, I feel quite all right, Mrs. Bronson."

After that Patricia entered into the conversation. Barbara knew that Mrs. Bronson did not understand Patricia's actions, but she could not help feeling relieved when Patricia started to converse.

"I suppose that both of you passed all your examinations?"

"We don't know what our grades were yet, but I don't believe I flunked anything, and I know Barbara didn't. What time is it, Babs?"

"Five twenty-two."

"Goodness! Can it be that late?"

"Perhaps Donald has been necessarily detained. I expected him to have arrived by the time Babs and I got here."

"No. I never expected him until about four, but it's almost five thirty now."

The three talked on in the same confident way until the town clock droned out the hour of six.

"My goodness!" exclaimed Barbara. "I promised Mother that I would prepare supper tonight. Here it is six o'clock and I'm not even home. I guess that I had better go now for I intended stopping at the store. Are you going to wait, Pat?"

"No, I think I should go now, too. Will you call us, Mrs. Bronson, when Donald comes?"

"Yes, I certainly will. I wish you both could stay and eat with me. I had planned to eat supper tonight with Donald, but I don't believe he is going to get here in time. I begin to feel quite hungry. I will let you both know when he comes."

"All right." The girls spoke together.

"Goodbye," called Mrs. Bronson.

"Goodbye."

Upon reaching the gate, where they were out of hearing distance of Mrs. Bronson, Barbara said in a low tone, "I can't understand what could have detained him. If anything had happened that he couldn't come, Mrs. Bronson would have been notified."

"It looks rather funny to me. Still, something unexpected might have come up." Patricia seemed only too ready to drop the subject, and her friend noticed this."

"Of course there might have been an accident or something like that."

"Oh, I think he will come in a little while."

"Meanwhile, Mrs. Bronson was patiently waiting for her son. Was this to be another great disappointment in her life? Perhaps he never cared for her at all; he might even now be on his way back to his old life of crime. But no, he was so happy when she had paid her last visit to his cell and he had told her of his parole. He had asked the authori-

ties to let him tell her the good news himself. He would surely come in a little while, but if he didn't, then she would call the prison, which was eighty-six miles away, and see if he had left.

Slowly the slender figure rocked to and fro in her chair. Sitting there alone in the night, she had plenty of time for reflection and reminiscence. She tried to imagine how Benjamin Donaldson must have felt toward her when he received that forged note saying in that hard, cold way that she couldn't care. Many other memories were recalled to mind, and at last with a sad and melancholy loneliness, she decided to retire for the night.

The air had suddenly grown quite cold and Mrs. Bronson decided to close the windows in her parlor. Pushing the curtain back she was about to lower the window when she saw a man standing directly beneath the window!

CHAPTER XX

"MY GOD, I've killed my own son!" Mrs. Bronson was bending over a still form lying beneath one of the windows of her parlor. Putting her head to the still heart, she breathlessly listened. The man was dead! Where should she go—what should she

do? Frantically the frightened woman stared at the weapon in her hand. "No one will ever believe what I say. I am a murderess! They won't believe me when I tell them. They will laugh at me and call me a liar. They will never believe the truth! Oh, Donald, Donald, why did you do it?"

Over and over again, Mrs. Bronson repeated these last words. A dark still form lay stretched on the bare ground. Another still form lay beside it with its head resting on the other's chest. The night was deathly still; an occasional sob was all that broke the silence. The wind grew chilled, and still there was no movement from the two forms.

Off to one side of Mrs. Bronson's house was a small grove of maple trees. A short stocky figure moved among the trees with the stealthiness of a cat. The man concealed something wrapped in an old sweater beneath one arm. With one backward glance at the tragic scene which he had just left, the man began to swiftly run along the dusty road, and was soon lost from sight among the dark, gloomy shadows of the night.

Sheriff Mason was awakened at five o'clock in the morning by the persistent ringing of his telephone.

"Hello," spoke Mason in a gruff voice. Probably some family quarrel for him to settle, or someone wanting him to put a rabid dog out of its misery.

"This the sheriff?" It was a man's muffled voice, speaking in little over a whisper.

"Yes!"

"There has been two murders at the old Bronson place east o' town." Swiftly the receiver was replaced.

Mason's mouth stood open dumbfoundedly while he stood holding the receiver in his hand. Giving the telephone hook a downward yank he waited for the operator to speak.

"Operator," came the girl's voice.

"Where was that call from just now?"

"Just a minute, please." After a brief pause which seemed hours to the waiting man, "The call which you received just now was from the downtown pay-station."

"Thank you, operator. Now this is important— See if you can see anyone on the street, then call the night police and tell him to come to Mrs. Matilda Bronson's residence immediately; then call Doctor Branner; tell him it is very urgent. Thanks."

"Don't touch 'em till the Doctor gets here and has had a chance to examine them. Right now it looks like a bad case to me. Has Blake gone?"

"Yep," returned the night policeman.

Blake, who was the deputy sheriff, had gone in search of the man who called Sheriff Mason to in-

form him of the two murders at Mrs. Bronson's home.

While Blake was combing the surrounding territory, Mason was busy examining the immediate territory of the tragedy.

When he returned Doctor Branner drove up in front of the house. "What's up?" questioned Branner, as he stepped from his low, green roadster.

"A coupla funny lookin' cases. Can't tell yet whether it's two murders or what." This was Mason's first murder case in all the five years of his career as sheriff; he felt rather proud that at last he had a chance to show Bradford what an excellent choice they had made when they selected him as sheriff. "Been scourin' that maple grove east of the house. Found a place all matted down like somebody'd slept there, but not a ghost of anybody."

"Who is it?"

"A man and Matilda Bronson."

"Good God!" Branner quickened his speed. "Any fingerprints?"

"I'll tell you about that later."

Reaching the two still forms, Doctor Branner immediately set about to find some signs of life.

"The man's gone; but hurry and help me get this woman inside; there's a small spark of life yet."

Doctor Branner worked long and hard over the seemingly lifeless and still form. A quick reflex

quivered the body and to the waiting doctor came the sound of a low sigh. A bullet had entered Mrs. Bronsons' body, just missing her heart. The room was darkened and carefully Branner sat down beside the bed where the woman lay.

"Donald, why did——" The effort to talk was too much for her, and her weak voice trailed off into the silence.

"Do you know me, Mrs. Bronson?" Slowly she opened her eyes and looked at the doctor blankly.

Branner studied his patient for some little time; then slowly stalked out of the room.

CHAPTER XXI

BARBARA and Patricia had already heard of the terrible tragedy. When Doctor Branner and Sheriff Mason called at her home the following morning, Barbara met them at the door with reddened and swollen eyes.

"Is she dead?" she eagerly questioned.

"No, Miss Hunt, Mrs. Bronson is not dead. She will not have passed the crisis until the third day. Not until then will she be out of danger."

"Is her son, Donald, dead?"

Doctor Branner cast an inquisitive glance at the sheriff.

"There is no one here that can overhear us?" queried Mason as he glanced at the library door.

Barbara shook her head. "Not unless his mother and——"

"Well," broke in Mason, "the other person who figured in the Bronson tragedy was not the son Donald." A slight sigh of relief escaped Barbara. "But it was a woman dressed in Mrs. Bronson's son's clothing."

"A woman?" The surprised girl's mouth stood open in dumb wonderment.

"Yes; about thirty years of age and about the build of Mrs. Bronson's son. The woman who was evidently disguised as Donald was murdered; but Matilda Bronson attempted to take her own life."

"Oh no, Mr. Mason. I don't believe Mrs. Bronson attempted suicide."

"The examinations revealed that to be true, Barbara. A gun was found near Mrs. Bronson, one shot having been discharged from the weapon. It bore the initials 'M.H.B.' But the other woman was murdered with a sharp pointed instrument; Doctor Branner thinks, perhaps an ice-pick. That instrument has not yet been found. The discovery of the weapon used to kill the dead woman would no doubt furnish a very likely clue as to who the mur-

derer is. Perhaps, when we get Mrs. Bronson's story, it will throw some light on the mystery, but according to Doc here, it will be some time before I can talk to her."

"When will Patricia and I be able to see her, Doctor Branner?"

"That is really what we came over for, Barbara; to tell you what we have found and to ask a favor of you."

"A favor of me?" Barbara was much surprised to think that the well known Doctor Branner was wanting to ask a favor of her. "Why, what is it, Doctor?"

"Mrs. Bronson is in a very serious condition, and of course, it will be necessary for her to have a nurse. I have thought it over and have come to the conclusion that with the Girl Scout First Aid and Homemaker's training you have received you would be as competent a nurse as I could secure around here."

"I?" echoed Barbara.

"Yes, you. You are a very good friend of this poor soul, and it is going to take much coaxing to pull her through. You see, Barbara, she thinks her son is dead and so she doesn't want to live. I believe that you would come about as near persuading her that it was not her son that was murdered as anyone else could. You will come?"

"Of course I shall come, Doctor Branner; and I certainly am pleased to get the chance. Mrs. Bronson would sacrifice much to help me, and I am glad of the chance to turn the tables for one time."

"When can you be ready, Barbara?"

"It will require only a few minutes; just long enough for me to tell Mother and gather up a little clothing. If you will both excuse me, I will hurry now."

Doctor Branner leaned forward, his elbow resting on his knee. "Mason, I've never asked that girl to help me out, but what she went, eager to do her part. You saw for yourself that she had no thought of refusing to go. Only one who has made a little study of medicine or first aid, can very well realize what I have asked of this young girl; and she'll do it, don't think she won't."

"I was wondering, Branner, if it is a good plan to have a personal friend of Mrs. Bronson to care for her? You know as soon as she is able, we must get Mrs. Bronson's story. I have no doubt but that it will clear up much of the mystery, or," Mason slightly lowered his voice, "even point to the murderer, Miss Hunt loves Matilda Bronson, and it is plain to see would do anything to protect her. Any words that Mrs. Bronson might say will help, for it looks as if——"

"Look here," broke in Branner. "If you mean

to imply that Mrs. Bronson was the assassin I want to say this: When you find the weapon that was used to murder the disguised woman then I will talk to you about the probable murderer. As for a personal friend nursing Mrs. Bronson, well—you should remember, Mr. Mason, that if you expect to get Mrs. Bronson's story, she's got to have someone that can really take care of her and pull her through."

"Yes, that's right too, Doc."

"Why, good morning, gentlemen." Mrs Hunt entered the room where the two men were sitting, and spoke a pleasant greeting.

"Good morning, Mrs. Hunt. No doubt your daughter has told you that I have asked her to be a special nurse for me?" Doctor Branner smiled mischievously at Barbara.

"Yes, she has told me, Doctor, and I am willing to let her go; but do you think she can——"

"I am perfectly willing to trust Mrs. Bronson in Barbara's care. If you will not need your daughter for awhile, I will be taking her with me now. I must be getting back to my patient."

"You must let me know how Mrs. Bronson gets along, Barbara dear."

"Yes, I will call you, Mother. 'Bye."

"Goodbye, take good care of her, Bab." Mrs. Hunt stood in the doorway, watching her daughter

climb into the doctor's car. She could not help but see the eager light shining in Barbara's eyes. "She's so happy to get this chance," Mrs. Hunt muttered to herself. "I know she will take good care of Mrs. Bronson, but——" Her thoughts went trailing over the terrible tragedy which had occurred the night before. Would her daughter in any way involve herself in the mystery, by caring for Mrs. Bronson? "Oh pshaw," she said aloud. "That is foolish. Barbara will be careful." But Mrs. Hunt was not really so sure. Having so recently lost her daughter, Mrs. Hunt was more anxious at seeing her leave than she had pretended. As she resumed her housework, two questions were on Mrs. Hunt's mind.

Who murdered the disguised woman?

Where was Mrs. Bronson's son?

CHAPTER XXII

SOFTLY tip-toeing into the darkened room, Barbara sat down beside the bed of the sick woman. Carefully leaning forward, she peered into the pale face of her dearly loved friend. Tenderly she felt of the sick woman's pulse. "I wonder——" Barbara said to herself as she walked to the farthest end of the room, and raised one of the lowered

window shades. A small shaft of sunlight entered the uncanny room. "I am following the doctor's orders, but he never said a word about the shades; so I'm following my own rules on that."

Walking back to the bed, Barbara saw that Mrs. Bronson had moved her head slightly with her eyes fastened on something. "I believe it's the light," thought the young girl. "Oh if she only has really noticed it."

Placing the tan, wrinkled hand in her own young, soft one, Barbara tenderly rubbed it.

"Do you know me, Mrs. Bronson?" she softly whispered.

The pale old lady gave no heed to her question. Barbara slowly shook her head.

Mrs. Bronson's lips slowly began to move, but Barbara could hear nothing. Upon bending nearer, she caught the words: "Donald, I—didn't—mean—to. Why did—you—do—it?" Mrs. Bronson seemed very tired. After a short pause Barbara stroked the wrinkled forehead and asked, "You didn't mean to do what, Mrs. Bronson?"

It was a long time before Mrs. Bronson answered. She seemed to be trying to think. "Don't—you—know?" she asked at last.

"No, I don't. Tell me, won't you? Please tell Barbara, Mrs. Bronson."

"I—killed—my son, Donald." Her eyes opened wide and then closed tight.

Barbara softly tip-toed from the room. Once outside, she gave vent to her pent-up tears.

Suddenly Barbara heard Mrs. Bronson choke. Running into her room, she found the weakened woman trying to sit up in the bed.

"Oh, Mrs. Bronson, you mustn't do that." Carefully laying her back down, Barbara said, "You mustn't try to sit up again, Mrs. Bronson; you want to live, but you can't if you do that way."

"Live?" Mrs. Bronson tried to laugh, but only a gurgle sounded in her throat. "I—don't—want—to live." Then in a puzzled voice, "Don't you know? I killed my son."

"It wasn't your son, Mrs. Bronson. Donald has gone for some medicine to make you well. It—was another man you killed. You want to live for Donald, don't you?"

"No—I—killed Donald. Donald is dead, like I'm going to be."

This was almost too much for the young girl, but she resolved to try all the harder.

It was a long day for Barbara. No one was permitted to see Mrs. Bronson, so she was quite alone.

Again that evening she tried to explain to the poor old woman, that it was not her son that she killed, but another man. Mrs. Bronson, however,

still believed that she had murdered her son. Barbara thought that if she could persuade Mrs. Bronson to believe that she hadn't killed her son, when she was better she could tell them a story that would clear up much of the mystery. When Doctor Branner made his call that evening, he seemed very satisfied with Barbara's nursing, and the prospects for Mrs. Bronson's recovery.

"I humor her, and tell her that she did kill a man, but not her son."

"Fine!" exclaimed Branner.

When Barbara told him about raising the window shade, and that after Mrs. Bronson noticed the light she began to talk, the doctor seemed even more satisfied.

"If you need me tonight, just call, Barbara. I'll be listening for the 'phone."

It had been planned that Patricia should stay with Barbara at nights. When she arrived, she too, was very saddened at the condition of Mrs. Bronson.

"And she firmly declares that she killed her son," Barbara was saying to her companion. "Of course, that woman dressed in her son's clothing would make her think it was he—but Pat, why should she think that she killed him?"

Slowly Patricia shook her head. "If the weapon used for the murder could only be found it would perhaps give me a very likely clue as to who the

murderer is. Have they identified the dead woman yet?"

"Doctor Branner said this evening that they had not been able to find the least identity, yet."

"Say, Babs," Patricia glanced at the open window. "Do you realize that below that window lies the scene of the tragedy?"

It had not occurred to Barbara to be afraid, but now a strange feeling of fright overcame her. It was enough to frighten most any young girl to be in the same house at night with a woman who had attempted suicide, and declared she was a murderess, not to say the feeling of being so very near the place of the tragic scene.

"Let's don't talk about that now," whispered Barbara. "If Mrs. Bronson isn't convinced by morning that her son isn't dead, though he may be, I have a plan that I intend to use."

"Barbara, do you think that Donald could be at the bottom of this? You know his not returning looks mighty suspicious, and then that woman disguised in his clothing."

A sudden thought seemed to have struck Barbara, for she quickly left the room and started for the stairway.

"What's the matter, Babs?"

"Nothing; I'll explain when I come down," called back Barbara as she went up the stairs.

As Patricia sat in deep meditation, she suddenly heard Barbara scream!

Reaching the top of the stair, she rushed into Mrs. Bronson's spare room and found Barbara, wide-eyed and trembling, peering out an open window into the darkness.

"What's the matter?" questioned Patricia.

"A man! He went through this window."

"Quick! Run downstairs. Perhaps we can see him."

"No, I'll hurry and call Sheriff Mason."

Quickly the two ran to the telephone.

"This is Barbara, Mr. Mason. A man has just been in an upstairs room. Yes. Yes. He had a black box under his arm all right." Barbara replaced the receiver. "He's coming right out with some searchers."

"You said that the man had a black box, Babs."

"Yes, come with me."

Together the girls hurried up the steps to the room where Barbara had seen the man.

"What did he look like Babs?"

"I don't know. Only that he wasn't so tall and wore a grey sweater. He had his back turned and was just going through the window when I reached the door."

Barbara opened a bureau drawer and stepped back in surprise.

"What is it Babs?"

"The black box. Both of them are gone!"

CHAPTER XXIII

"GONE?" echoed Patricia.

"Yes, they are both gone."

"Are you sure that Mrs. Bronson never moved them?"

"Yes. That man had one of the boxes under his arm."

"But where can the other be?"

"I don't know." The girls looked at each other in dumb surprise.

"Well, I think I do! I bet that the person who committed the murder was after the other black box—and got it!"

"That might be, Pat. But why did the person who got the other black box, murder the woman? Anyway, I almost know that the trouble is all over those two black boxes. When Sheriff Mason comes, we must tell him about it."

The two sat down to await Mr. Mason's arrival. It was not long before they heard his steps upon

the porch. "It's Mason," he called as he reached the door, probably not wanting to frighten them.

"Come on in," as Barbara went to the door.

"How is Mrs. Bronson?"

"I was just in her room," answered Barbara, "and she was sleeping soundly."

"Good! Which one of you young ladies saw the man?"

"I did," answered Barbara, and she proceeded to tell the sheriff how she happened to see the man make his escape with the black box.

"And," she concluded, "Pat and I went back to the room and found that the other box was gone too!"

"Where did she keep those boxes?"

"In the middle bureau drawer; and she kept them together."

"Hu-um! Did the man have one or two boxes, Barbara?"

"Only one, I'm quite certain, for his other hand was on the window sill, and there was only one box under his left arm."

"Well, one of those boxes must have been stolen before tonight, then! I don't see how that man got in and out again, with the house guarded."

"Guarded!" cried the girl in one voice.

"Yes. Didn't I tell you it would be? I guess I musta forgotten it. Well, anyway guards were

placed where they could watch the house all night. It's mighty blamed funny to me how that man got in here. Guess I'll go upstairs and take a look at things."

"Are the men searching for the man?" queried Patricia.

"Yes, Miss Gordon. They are looking for the critter, while the guards are keepin' a close lookout. I've questioned them an' hanged (pardon my slang, ladies) if they've seen a man or even a suspicious sign all evening."

The sheriff turned and walked up the steps.

Barbara went in the bedroom to see if Mrs. Bronson was all right. "She's sleeping soundly," she answered to Patricia's inquisitive look as she returned from the bedroom.

"Well," sighed Patricia. "Whatever that man was after was in the box, and he got the box right from under our noses. We're a coupla smart ones to let anyone pull something like that. We both ought to cover up our heads and hide. If we'd have been wise, we'd have brought the two, I mean the one box down here and kept it with us. Then when that man came to get it we could have captured the probable murderer."

"We should have gotten the box, Pat, but it isn't our fault that the man gained entrance to that room.

What were the guards doing? It was their duty to see that no one got into this house."

Both girls were surprised to see Mason coming from the direction of the kitchen.

In answer to the question on their puzzled faces Mason said, "Just been looking around a bit. The man who got away with the box musta been hiding somewhere in the house all day, an' he may be hidin' there now, but there's no chance of his leaving 'cause I've got every door in the house guarded. You girls needn't be afraid. There's nothing that can bother you, but if you'd rather, I can get someone to stay in here with you."

"Oh, no. We aren't a bit afraid, Mr. Mason. It is very kind and thoughtful of you, but Patricia and I would rather be alone. We will be all right."

"If you need me for anything, just call. If I'm not at home or the office, I'll be around here somewhere."

"Thank you, Mr. Mason. We will call, if we need you."

"All right. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

"Gee, it's amost twelve o'clock, Babs. I had no idea it was so late. It seems only an hour since I came over. I guess the excitement has made the time go so swiftly."

"Should we take turns staying up with Mrs.

Bronson, or should we both stay up all night? I, myself, don't feel as if I could go to sleep tonight."

"I don't feel very sleepy either, but it's certain you can't sit up all night. You've got to have some rest, if you're going to be up all day tomorrow, taking care of Mrs. Bronson."

"I'll sit up until three, and you can sleep, then you sit up until six and I'll sleep. How's that?"

"Fine! Then you will get to have your turn at sleeping, just before you start the day. If your watch is first, I guess I had better retire. Where do you think I had better sleep? I don't much like the idea of being away off upstairs with you down here alone. If anything should happen, or if Mrs. Bronson should get worse, it would be harder for you to get me in a hurry."

"There's a cot in Mrs. Bronson's bed-room, Pat. It was put there purposely for our use. You get your rest now, and don't worry. Everything will be all right now."

"Be sure to wake me at three and before, if you need me."

"Yes, I will call you."

"Goodnight, honey."

"Goodnight."

For a long while, Barbara sat thinking over the facts she had learned. Mr. Mason had called the prison and authorities told him that Donald Bron-

son had left there at noon, the day he got his parole.

Barbara could hear the regular breathing coming from the sleeping Patricia in the next room. "Poor child, she was tired, and too brave to own up to it."

Finding a magazine, and having first assured herself that Mrs. Bronson was sleeping, Barbara became absorbed in the reading. The time slowly dragged on and more slowly the night deepened.

"This is the first day of June," thought Barbara as she glanced up from her reading. "We ought to get our report cards about tomorrow." Her thoughts trailed back over the school events of the year. "What a glorious game the girls played when they won from the girls' basketball team of Brownsville High. The boys made a double triumph by winning their game that night. If it hadn't been for Mary ringing that last basket we would have been defeated by one point. Mary certainly did make a beautiful shot."

On and on, Barbara's thoughts trailed over triumphs and defeats that only good sportmanship and school life can bring.

Barbara had been captain and guard on the basketball team that year. When the team was organized at the beginning of the season, Barbara had explained to them that she expected them to work for victory, but not victory alone; that is wasn't so much the outcome of the game, as how you played

it. The girls had been defeated twice, and both times met it with a smile. They had won considerable mention for their good clean sportmanship. Practically all of the responsibility had fallen on the shoulders of Barbara. It had been hard at times, but she had succeeded in steering them clear of the rocks. Now she could think back over these events, but not with entire satisfaction; there had been times when she thought she had used very poor judgment.

Partricia had been, as Barbara termed it, her "right hand" during that season of games. "And now," Barbara was thinking, "she is still sticking like a leech. What would I ever have done without dear, sweet, lovable Pat? It would take all of the nice adjectives in the world to really describe her." These thoughts of her friend drew Barbara to the bedroom. Reaching for the light, she could hear Patricia's regular breathing. The light had been dimmed but as Barbara switched it on, Mrs. Bronson slowly turned her head on her pillow toward the light.

"She's noticed it," happily thought Barbara. "Did you call?" she asked.

"Call?"

"Yes, did you call?" Barbara repeated her question:

"For what?"

"Did you call for Barbara?"

"Barbara—Barbara." Slowly she repeated the name over to herself. "Is she here?"

"Yes. Here's Barbara. Right here she is, Mrs. Bronson. I've come to take care of you and—and make you well."

Mrs. Bronson wanly smiled. It was a weak one, but nevertheless it cheered Barbara.

"Has he come with the medicine yet?"

"Donald? Well, no. He hasn't come yet, but he had to go a long, long way to get the medicine. We expect him back any time now. Perhaps you will be so nearly well when he returns that you won't need the medicine." Barbara fixed the covers more comfortably.

"But I'll have to leave him when he comes back."

"Why? You won't have to leave him, 'cause you're going to get well and keep house for Donald." Barbara had misinterpreted Mrs. Bronson's meaning. She thought she detected a sad look come into her eyes as she said that.

"Barbara, I killed a man; murdered him."

Unconsciously the girl's heart gave a quick leap. Mrs. Bronson believed then that she really was Barbara. "Won't you tell me about it?" she asked.

"I couldn't help it, Barbara. I shot him in self defence. I know that they won't believe what I

say, but you will. After you and Patricia—but where is she?”

“Pat? Why, she is sleeping on a cot in the room here with you.”

“Aren’t you sleepy?”

“No. I’m going to sleep after awhile.”

“You had better run along now, and get some rest.” This was just like Mrs. Bronson, worrying about the other person.

“I must let Patricia sleep awhile longer yet. Then I will sleep, when she awakens. Do you want anything?”

“Not a thing. If you aren’t too tired I’d like to tell you about it. I know you will understand, even if they won’t.”

“Don’t talk until you are too tired. Of course I want you to tell me about it. You mustn’t worry for I know ‘they’ will believe you too.”

“I hope they will, ’cause I want to be with my boy, when he comes back.” Barbara was wondering if he would ever return again. “After you and Patricia left I sat on my porch for a long while, thinking that Donald might come. As I sat watching and waiting I thought back over old events and times. I thought I had better retire, as it was late and growing quite cool.” Mrs. Bronson paused, and rested her voice a few minutes. Glancing at her watch, Barbara left the room. When she re-

turned she held a water glass, and a glass tube.

"It is time for your medicine."

"Is it the medicine Donald brought?"

"No, this is some that Doctor Branner left for you."

"Has he been here?"

"Yes, he has been to see you several times, since your—your accident."

"I guess I was asleep when he came."

"Take it slowly," as she put the top of the tube in the sick woman's mouth. "That's it. Just a little more. My, but Doctor Branner will be pleased, when he finds how much of this you took."

"Now," setting the glass aside, "if you feel more rested, you can finish telling me what you had started."

"As I was about to lower the east window of the parlor, I saw a man standing outside directly below the window. He must have been standing on something, for the window is rather high from the ground. I could not see much of his face, but he had removed the screen from the window and thrust a gun into my face. I had no idea what it all could mean, so I asked him what he was wanting. And——"

"What did he say?" asked Barbara.

"He said he had come for his black box."

"What happened then?"

"I looked up just in time to see a short man, wearing—I think a grey sweater, come through the front door. Frantically I ran into my bedroom where I kept my revolver. I can't remember how I managed it, but when I returned to the parlor the man in the grey sweater had disappeared! I ran to the window and looked out into the darkness. Two shots were fired somewhere near the window. I was so excited, I hardly knew what to do. I had no definite object to aim at, but shot wild and—well, I found that I had killed a man! I thought it was—Donald. I have had so many disappointments in my life that—I guess I was too much of a coward to face this one, so—well, I intended to kill myself but I guess it wasn't meant for me to die just then. That is all I can tell. I can give no definite description of either man, except the one I thought was my son—and killed—wore a grey suit, light shirt, and dark cap. They looked like my son's clothing. Perhaps that is why I thought it was he."

"Mrs. Bronson, the person who was murdered last night or early this morning, was not a man, but a woman dressed in your son's clothing."

"A woman?"

"Yes." Barbara had not forgotten that Doctor Branner had said that Mrs. Bronson would not be out of danger until the third night; this was only the first, or rather the second morning, as she

glanced at her watch. She decided not to tell Mrs. Bronson that no one knew where her son was, until after she had passed the crisis. "We have not been able to identify the dead," (Barbara did not like to use the word 'murder' in Mrs. Bronson's presence) woman or find how she got Donald's clothing."

"Donald is safe?"

"Perfectly. No doubt he will soon return. He may have been delayed on account of business. Are you tired?"

"No. Not so very tired, Barbara."

"I have a question I would like to ask of you; then I must call Patricia. What is in those two boxes that anyone could be after?"

Mrs. Bronson thought for a while, then said, "All that is in the box which was my own was some old newspaper clippings, and two baby pictures of Donald. I do not know what was in the box which had belonged to Benjamin, because I placed it in the drawer with the other, not bothering any of the papers. Why do you ask?"

"Both boxes are gone! The disguised woman who stood under your window, was after one of them, and a man wearing a grey sweater stole the other about eleven o'clock tonight."

"My brain is in such a jumble I cannot think clearly now. I may be able to recall something that might help, after I rest a bit."

"Yes, you must try to sleep now. If you think of anything, tell me in the morning. I will fix your bed now, and make you comfortable, then call Pat. It's after three, and I believe I will be able to sleep a little."

CHAPTER XXIV

MRS. BRONSON had rested well the remainder of the night, and was still sleeping when Patricia went home at seven o'clock the following morning.

Barbara had everything in perfect order, when Doctor Branner arrived at 7.30.

"Well, you never called me last night, Barbara, so I don't suppose you needed me." Branner smiled a pleasant greeting. "I take it, that you got through the night all right. Where's Patricia?" as he glanced around.

"She left about seven. She is coming over a while this afternoon. I have good news for you, Dr. Branner."

"Say, you're just full of surprises, Miss Hunt. What is it?"

Dr. Branner was busy with his medicine kit.

"It's quite long."

"I will see how Mrs. Bronson is; then, you can tell me. How's that?"

"Mrs. Bronson is sleeping now."

"Fine! I'll go in and see her a minute. She needs the rest so I won't disturb her."

The doctor was gone only a few minutes. Barbara could easily detect the pleased look in his eyes, when he returned.

"The wound is coming fine. If she just regains consciousness soon——"

"But she has," broke in Barbara. "That was the surprise I had for you."

"Things are coming about better than I had expected. Mrs. Bronson has just had a great shock and her nerves are terribly shot. I thought at first it might effect her mind, but she seems to be holding her own very well. She is a mighty plucky little woman, and doesn't deserve to have all the disappointments she has had in her life. Tell me all about the surprise. When she wakes up, I can tell more about her mental condition."

Barbara found a very attentive listener in Doctor Branner as she told him the incident of the night before.

When Barbara had finished, Branner did not speak for some time. When he did speak, it was in a slow meditative tone.

"Mason will have to be satisfied with this infor-

mation, until tomorrow night at least. He is very anxious to question Mrs. Bronson himself. It's queer that she thinks she is the murderer, when she has regained consciousness. It seems to me that she might have discharged the gun, the shot going wild, and someone else committed the murder with a sharp-pointed instrument. Of course, if you haven't told her that the woman was not killed by a gun, she would think her shot killed her, and that she was to blame. Mason thinks that in the excitement Mrs. Bronson grabbed the first thing she could reach, that would serve as a weapon; probably a—er—ice—pick, and——”

“Committed the murder?”

“Yes.” The doctor slowly nodded his head.

“But why would she kill the woman with an instrument like that when she had her gun?”

“That is the very question that knocks Mason's theory. Also, how did she get rid of the weapon, if she killed the woman. Another thing, Barbara: Sheriff Mason did not find any fingerprints on the gun bearing Matilda Bronson's initials. How is that accounted for?”

“Isn't it possible that the gun which was found, did not belong to Mrs. Bronson?”

“If it wasn't her gun, then what became of the gun which she said she had? The initials “M. H.

B." were on the butt of the handle. Those are her initials, aren't they?"

"Yes. Her name is Matilda Helen Bronson. It's mighty queer that no fingerprints could be found on the gun."

"Mason is certainly working on this case. He doesn't even take the time to eat; but he doesn't seem to be getting far. When I met him this morning he told me about the man getting away with the black box. He says he can't see 'how in thunder' that man got in and out again, with the house guarded. He searched the house all over, but couldn't find a trace of him."

"Listen a minute; I think Mrs. Bronson is awake."

"I will see," spoke Branner. "After I see her, I must hurry. If she is in condition to leave, I have several out-of-town calls to make."

When the doctor had left he was entirely satisfied with Mrs. Bronson's condition, and had left her in Barbara's care for the day.

Dinner over, Barbara was sweeping the kitchen. She was hoping that Patricia would bring her report card to her, when she came over that afternoon.

The back door to Mrs. Bronson's house opened into a small alcove. Another door leading from this, to the outside. In the summer-time, Mrs. Bronson always kept the kitchen door open, and the screen

to the outside door closed. As Barbara opened the kitchen door around to sweep behind it, she saw that the corner of the linoleum was sticking up. "I'll just get a hammer and some tacks and fix that for Mrs. Bronson." Pushing her foot along the floor, she meant to smooth the linoleum so that she could tack it to the floor. "There must be something under there that keeps it from smoothing." Pushing her hand back under the loose corner, Barbara tried to get hold of whatever it was under the floor covering. The rough corner of the stiff linoleum scratched her wrist. "Oh, pshaw! I can't even reach it; and I can't fix this linoleum unless I can get it out."

Removing two tacks, with some effort, she was able to reach it. Barbara suddenly caught her breath as she looked at what she had found. Dropping it as if it was a burning coal, her lips curled in horror. She had found a steel-handled ice-pick with blood stains on it, under the linoleum of Matilda Bronson's kitchen!

CHAPTER XXV

AT FIRST, stricken dumb, Barbara could not think clearly. Things looked mighty bad for Matilda Bronson.

"Oh, I know she didn't do it. She didn't do it." Barbara cried over and over again to herself.

The pick lay where she had dropped it in that first moment of horror. Through Barbara's mind ran the thoughts of Mason's theory: That in the excitement Mrs. Bronson grabbed the first thing she could reach that would serve as a weapon, and had used it to kill the woman. No doubt this was the very weapon, and found in Mrs. Bronson's house!

Barbara knew she could turn the pick over to Sheriff Mason, and yet she could hardly bear the thought of doing so. There would probably be fingerprints and Barbara was so sure of her friend's innocence that she decided the best plan would be to let the sheriff get the fingerprints.

Calling every conceivable place, she at last succeeded in finding Mr. Blake, the night policeman, who informed her that Sheriff Mason was out of town.

As Barbara turned away from the telephone she

saw her intimate friend, Patricia Gordon, coming up the front walk.

Barbara knew she could always take her troubles to her companion, and have her talk them over with her; and Patricia always consulted Barbara. When Barbara saw her friend coming up the walk, her heart gave a leap of joy, and she rushed to meet her and tell of her discovery.

As the two met they locked arms and together went up the walk to the porch.

Patricia at once detected something wrong and asked: "Is Mrs. Bronson any worse, Babs?"

"No, she is not any worse. In fact, Mrs. Bronson is getting along very well. Doctor Branner was so pleased with her present condition that he will not make another call until this evening."

"Well, what *is* the matter, then?"

"I found the instrument used for killing——"

"What is it? Where did you find it?"

"I found it in the kitchen. I will explain all about it when we get in the house. I must say, it has upset me more than I could have expected of such a thing."

"Poor girl. I could see right away when I first laid eyes on you that something was wrong. I should think it would upset you."

The ice-pick still lay where the horrified Barbara had dropped it. Being careful not to touch it, Pat-

ricia looked at it a moment, and then asked, "Are there any stains on it?"

"Yes; two of them. I could see them quite plainly when I first found it. See, here is one; and here is another," as she pointed out the two spots to her companion.

"How did you ever happen to find it?"

Then Barbara related the incident, showing the exact place where she had found the pick.

Hardly had she finished when Sheriff Mason walked in.

"Why—a—hello, Mr. Mason. I tried to get you on the 'phone a while ago; but Mr. Blake said you were out of town."

The sheriff's eyes were already frozen on the blood-stained ice-pick lying on the floor at Barbara's feet.

"What did you want, Miss Hunt?"

Barbara glanced down at her feet. "I found this, and thought you should see it immediately to get the fingerprints."

"Where did you find it?" as he stooped to look at the pick.

Again, Barbara told of her discovery.

"I will take this and let you know the results I find as soon as possible. You have made a very valuable find, and have also done the right thing by

turning this over to the authorities. How is Mrs. Bronson?"

"She rested very well during the night, and the doctor thinks she is getting along as well as can be expected from the shock she received."

"'Doc' Branner didn't leave word when I could see her, did he?"

"No, but he did say that you could not see her before tomorrow night at least. Of course if she should take a sudden turn for the worse, it would no doubt be quite a while before you could question her then. She will not have passed the crisis until the third day; and her nerves being so shattered she can not stand much questioning. I have some other things to talk over with you, Mr. Mason."

"All right, Miss Hunt, I'm ready any time."

"To begin with, Mrs. Bronson has regained consciousness!"

"She has?" Mason seemed very much surprised. "When?"

"Last night; not so very long after you had left."

"Has she said much—anything important?"

"Well, I should consider what she has said very important. Doctor Branner says that she has her right mind, and she knows exactly what she is saying. She has told me the entire story as she thinks it to have taken place."

"Good God! Pardon me, ladies. Tell me what

she said, Miss Hunt. I wish to heaven that I could see her myself; but Branner knows best, and he gives an emphatic 'No!' Tell me her story as near like she said it, as possible."

Barbara related the story as Mrs. Bronson had told it to her, the night before. As she finished, Barbara asked a question: "Isn't it possible, Mr. Mason, that the gun which was found did not belong to Mrs. Bronson?"

"In a way it seems very likely so, for if the gun was hers, there would very likely have been fingerprints, and yet, she says that she had her gun. If what she claims is true, what became of her revolver? I have searched the house and the outside grounds, but have been unable to find any trace of it yet."

"Couldn't the man who called to you and gave the report, have taken Mrs. Bronson's gun?"

"It is true, that the man who called me must be taken into consideration. He said two murders, and it was a murder and a suicide. It may have been a neighbor who happened to find the two and thought they had been murdered; then wishing the proper authorities to hear of it, and not wishing to involve himself, he called me, being careful not to disclose his identity."

"What business would any of the neighbors have

on the east side of her house at that time of night?" asked Patricia.

"Then say that it wasn't a neighbor; how does that help any?"

"It is certain that another person had to be at the murder scene before the alarm was given to you, for two reasons. They are: first, they had to have seen either the results or a part of the tragedy to give the report; and second, some one else was here and got away with one of the black boxes. Is it not possible that the person who stole the box, the one who committed the murder and the one who called you, were the same man?" queried Barbara.

"Didn't you say the man you saw escaping with the black box wore a grey sweater?" Patricia asked suddenly.

"Why, yes, I had forgotten about that."

"The man who Mrs. Bronson said came through her front door the night of the murder also wore a grey sweater. He may have murdered the woman, and thinking he had shot Mrs. Bronson, called you, telling you that there had been two murders. He later returned wearing the same grey sweater, and got the other box, when Barbara saw him escaping."

"That sounds very probable, Miss Gordon. I guess the next move is to get the fingerprints on this thing," as he looked at the ice-pick. "As soon as Branner gives me permission I am going over and

get Mrs. Bronson to identify this and the gun bearing her initials."

"Where are Donald's clothes, which the murdered woman wore?" interrogated Patricia.

"They are safely under lock and cover. Why do you ask?"

"Could I see them?"

"Yes, if you come around to my office about six this evening I will be there, as far as I can tell now. Well, goodbye, ladies. If you have any more important discoveries let me know." The sheriff started out the door and then deliberately turned and walked back into the house. "When Branner comes over, tell him to look me up. That is all. Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

"Why do you want to see those clothes, Pat?"

"For no definite reason. I guess it's just curiosity more than anything else. I think it is about time we were getting some wind of where Donald Bronson is, or at least what could have happened to him. Haven't you any suggestions?"

"No, I haven't any suggestions, but I've been thinking——"

"You have?" burst in Patricia, merely to cast aside the feeling of melancholy, which seemed to have engulfed her.

"Perhaps I should say I have been thinking a little more than usual of late. How is that?"

"Fine! Now tell me what you have been thinking about, the clear limpid pools of water at the foot of the green crested hills, or——"

"This is really serious, Pat. You can act crazy when I get through talking, but just at present I require your strict attention." Patricia seemed terribly bored as her friend began to speak. "Since all this trouble has taken place, I have been thinking how easy it would have been for Mrs. Bronson's son to have gone away to join another band of crooks, after he received his parole. It seems strange to me that after Donald had been reared in the environment and various ways of a crook, he could close tight the past, and live a straight present and future. It has happened, I know, but usually under a long and steady influence. Mrs. Bronson was with Donald only a short while before he was compelled to leave her and go to prison. Mrs. Bronson had very little time to influence Donald. She is not going to believe much longer that he has gone for medicine; and if she finds out the truth before he can really be located, I'm afraid she won't last long. This morning she joked a little and said that she guessed she could die while she was waiting for Donald to come with the medicine. She has asked several questions that have certainly placed me in rather tight situations."

"I'm sorry for that, Babs, and I know how hard

it is, but I do not agree with you on your ideas of Donald and his mother's influence. That day in the courthouse, when Donald realized he had a mother, every single bit of the past was dropped then and there, and the future was all that meant anything to him; the future and his mother. As for influence—well of course everyone has influence, consciously, or most of the time unconscious of the fact that every movement is an influence; but some people are just gifted by God to give heaps of influence, in just a short while. Mrs. Bronson is like that. It's the right kind of influence, too. As she and Donald stood in the courthouse that day, clasped in each other's arms, I could not help but detect the tie that came between them. It was wonderful for those who could see it." She paused, looking at the floor, her face smiling.

"No, I can't agree with you, honey. I truly believe that whatever has happened to the poor man is very much against his will."

"I only hope you are right, Patsy; and you usually are. Remember, the evening that Mrs. Bronson was waiting for Donald, you had one of those funny moods of yours, and just look at the trouble that has followed."

"Oh, I had forgotten about that. If you don't need me, I suppose I had better go now. I'm going to get material for a new dress on the way home,

and I must see those clothes. I will be back to-night. Say, I nearly forgot! Your mother sent this cake over to you, and I got your card."

"My report?"

"Uh-huh."

"Did you pass everything?"

"Yes. Look at your card and then let's exchange. I want to see your grades."

The ensuing half hour was spent in discussing grades, averages, teachers and so forth.

After Patricia had left, Barbara went to the door of Mrs. Bronson's room and looked in.

"Still sleeping! The rest will be very good for her nerves and whole physique."

Feeling rather hungry, Barbara unwrapped the cake which her mother had sent.

"Ummm! Sponge, my favorite cake."

CHAPTER XXVI

BARBARA looked out of the window just in time to see Doctor Branner and Sheriff Mason alight from the doctor's car. As they came up the walk, the two men were engaged in deep conversation.

"Now, don't ask too many questions and tire her,"

Barbara heard Branner say, as the two reached the porch.

"It won't take so many to get what I'm after, for I got her story from Barbara."

This was the evening of the third day, and the sheriff had come to question Mrs. Bronson concerning the recent murder.

"Good evening, Barbara."

"Good evening, Dr. Branner and Mr. Mason. Won't you two sit down?"

"Thank you, but I'm going to take a look at my patient." The doctor went into the bedroom, leaving Mr. Mason and Barbara sitting in the parlor.

"Did you get the fingerprints?" anxiously asked Barbara.

"There were no fingerprints on the pick, Miss Hunt, excepting your own."

"That certainly is queer."

"Very queer, indeed. There were no fingerprints on this revolver and none on the ice-pick used to kill Diane Pemburton!"

Just at that minute Branner came through the door.

"All right, Mason. Take it easy, now."

"Excuse me, please, Miss Hunt. I will explain it to you when I finish in here."

Barbara's mouth had dropped open at the mention of the name of the murdered woman and was

still in that position when the sheriff and doctor left the room.

Had Sheriff Mason identified the young woman?

Diane Pemburton. Barbara repeated the name over and over again. She found herself wondering what Diane Pemburton looked like and what kind of life she had lived before she met her tragic death. "A beautiful name," she muttered to herself.

"Good evening, Mrs. Bronson."

"Good evening, Sheriff Mason. Won't you be seated?"

"Thank you, I will. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"No, not if I can answer them."

"That is all right. Just answer those that you can. You admit that you killed a man last Thursday night?"

"Yes; in self-defence. I did not aim at the man, I only meant to frighten him."

"You used a steel-handled ice-pick to kill him with, didn't you?"

"Goodness, no. I used my revolver."

"Then, this isn't your ice-pick?"

Mrs. Bronson looked at the weapon which the sheriff held up for her view.

"Why, where did you get that?" She was very surprised.

"Then it is yours?"

"I don't deny it. I see no reason why I should, it is nothing but an ice-pick."

"A very common tool, yes. When did you see this last, before I showed it to you just now?"

"Thursday evening, when I made a pitcher of lemonade for Barbara Hunt and Patricia Gordon."

"And you used it that very night to kill a woman!"

"Mr. Mason," Mrs. Bronson's hands were trembling, but her voice was quite calm, "I do not deny that I killed a man with a gun, but by the merciful heavens, I did not kill a woman with that ice-pick."

"This must be the weapon you used, then."

"No, that is not my gun. The revolver which I committed the murder with was pearl handled, with my initials carved in the butt of the handle."

"Are these not your initials?"

"Yes, they are my initials, but that is not my gun!"

"This is the only gun that was found, yet you say that you committed the murder, using a gun and that this one is not yours. What became of your gun!"

"I do not know. I used one shot to kill the man, or he would have killed me, and the other I put into my own body, thinking I had killed my son."

"Two shots had been discharged from this gun.

What made you think it was your son you had shot, Mrs. Bronson?"

"He wore my son's clothing and when I asked what he wanted, he said, 'I have come, Mother for my black box.'"

"Mrs. Bronson, you seemed very much surprised when I said that you had killed a woman, not a man."

"Well?"

"Miss Hunt had already told you that it was a woman, dressed in your son's clothing."

"I do remember, now. I had forgotten about her telling me. Have you identified the woman?"

"Yes! She is a Miss Diane Pemburton from Chicago."

"Chicago?"

"Yes!"

"How could she have gotten my son's clothes?"

"That is something we would all like to know."

"Has Donald returned?"

Doctor Branner motioned a warning to the sheriff.

"Yes, but you were sleeping. He came in and kissed you and then had to leave again. He won't be gone so long this time."

"And I never got to see him. Was he feeling well?"

"Quite well. Yes,"

"Oh, I'm so glad, so glad."

"Mrs. Bronson, this pick was used to kill Diane Pemburton and was found hidden in your kitchen. You did the killing, didn't you?"

"Yes, but not with that ice-pick."

"With this then?"

"No, but with my own gun!"

"But the murder was not committed with a gun, but with your ice-pick."

"Then I did not murder that woman! I admit I was excited, but I did not lose my head until I thought I had killed my son."

"Things did not seem so bad and you wanted to live, after you found out that your son was not dead. Diane Pemburton has a mother."

"Living?"

"Yes! Imagine how she must feel toward the person who killed her daughter, and that person was——"

"Stop! I did not kill that woman, Mr. Mason; not if she was killed with that ice-pick."

"That is enough, Mason. I can't let you stir a patient of mine to such a high pitch, law or no law."

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Bronson. It has been necessary for me to question you and I am pleased with your answers only for one thing; and that is the infernal disappearance of your gun."

"Mr. Mason."

"Yes?"

"Can you tell me how you identified Diane Pemberton?"

"I am very sorry, Barbara, but I have some special business that I must look after immediately. I will come as soon as possible and tell you all about it."

"All right. I would like very much to have you tell me."

"How is she?" asked Barbara as Doctor Branner came through Mrs. Bronson's bedroom door.

"She is tired and somewhat nervous. I expected that, however. Give her the medicine every two hours now. If she is sleeping, do not disturb her. You needn't give it to her at all after nine at night, until she awakes in the morning. It will not be necessary for either you or Patricia to remain up all night. I think Mrs. Bronson will rest all right now, but in case she gets any worse, please let me know immediately."

"Did Mr. Mason tell her about Donald?"

"No. If she asks you, tell her the truth, but unless she does ask, let her think that all is well. I would rather you would tell her the truth than anyone else."

"Thank you, Doctor. I am truly glad that I may tell her myself."

"When it is all over, I will take you for a ride in my car."

"Thank you again. I won't forget your promise and I shall look forward to the ride."

"What a perfect gentleman," thought Barbara, after the doctor had departed. "What a wonderful young lady," was what Doctor Branner was thinking of Barbara.

When Patricia came over, Barbara said, "Mr. Mason was here this evening and he questioned Mrs. Bronson for quite awhile. He didn't find out anything different."

"Did he tell you that this woman had been identified?"

"The murdered woman?"

"Uh-huh."

"Yes, he told me that her name was Diane Pemberton, but he didn't get to say how she had been identified. Do you know?"

"Yes. I saw her too."

"Saw her? When?"

"This morning."

"Tell me, what does she look like?"

"Well, I wouldn't have gotten to see her, but her mother let me."

"Her mother?"

"Now wait until I tell you what she looks like, and then I'll explain the rest. She is very pretty, having very black, bobbed hair, and dark eyes. She has a small mouth and very pretty lips, but her

mouth is drawn to one side of her face. She had a small nose and thin beautifully arched eyebrows. Barbara, I never said it in front of her mother, but the look that was on that dead woman's face was one of fear!"

"Oh, Pat!"

"She didn't look like she was thirty-two years old, and she was the picture of her mother. Mrs. Pemburton, her mother, is taking the body to Chicago this afternoon for burial."

"Chicago?"

"Yes. The mother lives in Chicago. About twenty years ago Mrs. Pemburton and her husband separated. Diane, the daughter was twelve years old and very pretty. Having lost her husband, the mother heaped all her love and affection upon her daughter. Mrs. Pemburton was quite wealthy and she gave Diane everything that would make her happy. The daughter was very sweet until she reached the age of sixteen, and then she became very conceited. Diane met a young gentleman who was nice looking and a fine dresser. The mother, however, did not think him the type of a man for her daughter. Thinking of the welfare of the only child, Mrs. Pemburton advised her not to continue keeping company with the man. The daughter paid no attention and one sad night the hard blow fell upon the mother. Her daughter eloped, taking the

clothes which the poor mother had given her, and leaving no word, only that she would soon be married to the man she loved. The mother knew that a girl so young could know nothing of love, and waited, expecting her to return and beg forgiveness for her quick actions. Mrs. Pemburton never saw her from that time until last night when she identified her as her daughter.

"The mother told me, this morning, Babs, that at last the worry had ended for her and her mind could be at peace knowing her daughter is safe from the world of crime. Mrs. Pemburton thinks that since her marriage Diane has been compelled to live a life of crime, for the man she married was nothing short of a criminal. I told Mrs. Pemburton about Mrs. Bronson and she said that it all was a strange, strange story. If the girl's husband can be found, the mother will identify him and he can be questioned."

"Oh, that poor mother."

"I have more to tell you."

"What is it?"

"I didn't have time to go and see the clothes yesterday evening, but I went this morning and——"

"Yes? Go on."

"The trousers, coat, and cap, were Donald's and I couldn't tell whether the shirt was or not, until

I turned one sleeve inside out, and there, just where the sleeve was gathered to the cuff, I found three initials, which were probably the laundry mark!"

"What were the initials?"

"The same as on the gun: "M.H.B."

"That certainly ought to prove that the gun which was found and that shirt belong to the same person. That laundry mark ought to certainly help in locating the owner of the gun and shirt. Didn't Mrs. Pemburton tell you the name of the man her daughter married?"

"She, herself, didn't know, Babs, the name of the man Diane eloped with. He went by the nickname of 'Scottie.' They may have lived in Chicago after their marriage, and they may not. The mother did not know and the daughter's lips are closed by death; so it looks pretty hard to find the owner of that shirt just by those three inked initials."

"When one thing gets cleared up, there's always so much more that can't be explained. How is Mother?"

"She is fine, and she said to tell you that she certainly had missed you at home. She and Mother are coming over as soon as they can see Mrs. Bronson."

"I will see what Doctor Branner says and then I think they can come awhile tomorrow afternoon. Did you get the material for your dress?"

"Yes, and it's very pretty. It is silk crepe and is blue with yellow flowers and green stems. It is very cool looking."

"Have you decided how to have it made?"

"I think just plain, with a narrow tie belt. The flowers add such a beautiful touch that it should be made simple unless I wanted it to be more formal."

"When I start talking about summer clothes and such things, it makes me want to think where I shall spend my vacation. So many things have been happening that I haven't had a chance to talk to Mother about a trip or anything. Why, I haven't even had the chance to realize that school is out."

"I want to go camping this summer."

"I haven't been camping for two years. It would do Mother good to get out and enjoy the air and change that a camping trip could afford."

"Barbara," called Mrs. Bronson. "Are you busy?"

"No, Mrs. Bronson, I'm coming."

Patricia followed Barbara into the bedroom.

"Hello, Patricia."

"Hello, Mrs. Bronson. How are you feeling this evening?"

"I feel quite well, thank you, Pat. I think I will be able to get up before long."

"Oh, you mustn't get up before Doctor Branner says you can."

"But I think he will let me soon. He talked very encouraging this afternoon. My! Isn't it warm?"

"I don't notice it being so warm, do you Pat?"

"It doesn't seem so much to me."

"Perhaps it's your fever coming up again. I'll soon see."

Barbara placed the fever thermometer in the old lady's mouth with the care and diligence of a doctor.

"It has gone up a little. Have you been worrying about anything?"

"Why do you ask, Babs?"

"Because the worry is making your fever worse. Tell me, what is it?"

"Will you tell me the truth Babs?"

"Have I ever been false to you?"

"Well, I believe you have."

"What!" exclaimed the surprised girl.

"Tell me, what has really happened to my son. I know it was a necessity that you did not tell me the truth before."

"Yes, Mrs. Bronson. It was for your own good that I told you falsely of Donald." Barbara laid a comforting hand on that of Mrs. Bronson. "We do not know what has happened or befallen Donald, but whatever it is, is against his will, and he no doubt is worrying about you this very minute. I believe he was waylaid by these men that are after the black box, and is being held captive somewhere.

Donald is strong and can fight for himself, and I think it will not be so long before he comes back to you."

"I hope your theory is true. I thought when he didn't return that night that he might have gone back to his old life of crime."

Barbara cast a quick glance at Patricia.

"You must not worry any more, if you can help it. You must think of your own health. It will soon be medicine time, but try to get some sleep now."

"Thank you, Barbara. I'll try not to worry too much. Goodnight, girls."

"Goodnight, Mrs. Bronson. Shall I turn the light out?"

"Yes, please."

CHAPTER XXVII

SEVERAL days had passed and now Mrs. Bronson was permitted to sit up a short while each day. Things ran along in much the same manner until suddenly one morning Patricia burst into Mrs. Bronson's room. Mrs. Bronson was sitting among pillows and quilts in a chair. Barbara was making the bed.

"Oh, Babs! Have you heard about it?"

"Heard about what?"

"The man over at the jail?"

"No. What about it? Who is it?" Barbara was very eager and Mrs. Bronson, too, was all interest.

"Sheriff Mason brought a man over from Arlington and put him in the jail here at Bradford. He is under suspicion, and Sheriff Mason thinks he might be the man with the grey sweater,—the one that came in Mrs. Bronson's front door and whom you saw escape with a black box!"

"If they can only find out for sure, it ought to clear up much of the mystery," said Barbara. "If I could see the man, I might be able to tell if it is the one I saw."

"When Sheriff Mason returns from Arlington, he is going to take you over to the jail and have you see if you can identify him. I was over at the jail this morning and—why, what's the matter?"

Barbara was laughing so hard that her shoulders shook. "I'm sorry, Pat, but you certainly ought to go in for amateur detective work. First you make your way into a funeral home to view a murdered woman, then you crash the gates to the county jail. It is hard to tell what you will do, or where you will go next, but keep it up. I'm for you. Can

you tell me what the man who is being held at the jail looks like?"

"I do not need to tell you what he looks like, but I can tell you who he is!"

"What!" Mrs. Bronson, and Barbara spoke as in one voice.

"You remember, Babs, the servant who brought our meals to us while we were imprisoned in that underground dungeon?"

"You mean Sam?"

"Yes. Sam is the man that is over in the jail!"

"That was the man I saw with the box! I can't be mistaken. I know that back and the short, stocky figure that I saw escape with the black box. It was Sam. And now they have him in the jail. Oh, I'm so excited I hardly know what I'm doing. There, I put the bedspread on instead of the sheet! Pat, Mrs. Bronson, Sam was the man that was here, before the murder was committed and he was here the night after it was committed and I believe he took both the black boxes. Oh, I wish Sheriff Mason would come. Did you tell him that you recognized Sam as the servant of the gang that were after Mrs. Bronson's oil stock?"

"No—Mr. Mason had left for Arlington before I went to the jail. Where is your oil stock, Mrs. Bronson?"

"In a safety deposit vault at the bank. Donald

told me to put them there, before he went to prison. I had always kept them in the house before; because I didn't know they were worth anything. Donald said he would cash them in, and get the money for me, when he came back."

Both girls were relieved when they learned that the oil stock was safe.

"Sam was good to us in his rude way, wasn't he, Babs?"

"Yes, and I hope he does not have to answer for the murder, because I don't like to think of Sam as a murderer. He may be a thief and a crook, but he isn't cruel enough for that. But you never can tell, he may be guilty of the crime."

"I only went to the door of his cell, but when he looked up he recognized me, and smiled rather ashamed like, and then turned his head again. I didn't stay only a minute or two."

"Do you suppose Sheriff Mason will come over here when he returns?" queried Mrs. Bronson.

"Yes, I think he will, but he may not come right away. If he doesn't come by noon, I will call his office and see if he returned. We ought to tell him as soon as possible. I think you had better lie down, Mrs. Bronson. You mustn't sit up too long at a time."

With the help of Patricia, Barbara soon had Mrs. Bronson back in bed, and everything comfortable.

"I never realize that I am so tired until I get back into bed after sitting up for awhile."

"That is often the case. It takes some rest to know how tired you are."

"Your mother sent over some fried chicken and salad for your's and Mrs. Bronson's dinner, Babs."

"Can't you stay and have dinner with Barbara and me? Then you could be here when Mr. Mason comes."

"Yes, Pat, do," called Barbara from the kitchen, who had heard Mrs. Bronson's invitation. "Mother has sent enough dinner for five ordinary people, and I believe Mrs. Bronson and I could eat better with company."

"We would like very much to have you stay, Pat."

"Thank you, Mrs. Bronson. I will call Mother and see what she says. I would certainly love to stay, and here is hoping that Mother says 'Yes!'"

This brought a happy smile to Mrs. Bronson's face.

"What did she say?" inquired Mrs. Bronson as Patricia returned.

"Her Royal Highness has granted the request that I dine with you two ladies."

Patricia held her left hand on her hip, and her right hand on her right cheek; and opened her eyes in a haughty manner. "I know you are pleased to

have my society and the good company, which my presence furnishes." Turning to Barabara as she came through the door, she said, "Maid, set the table for one more. I am remaining for lunch."

Barbara smiled, bowed and then said, "Yes, Madam. Will you have lunch in the dining room, the parlor, the sun porch, or the kitchen?"

The mention of this last probable eating place brought a laugh from all three; after which they settled down to more serious conversation.

At noon of the same day, Sheriff Mason had not arrived home.

"I wonder what could have detained him so long," said Mrs. Bronson. "He had expected to get back sometime before noon and hasn't returned yet."

"A sheriff never knows what might detain him, and is never certain how long he will be gone when he starts on a trip. He will surely be back tonight, because he wants Barbara to go over to the jail with him."

Sheriff Mason returned to Bradford at eight o'clock that evening, and immediately upon his arrival, went to the Bronson residence.

"What did you find out?" inquired Patricia.

"Not much, but half a loaf is better than no bread at all. Who lives in the first house west of here, Mrs. Bronson?"

"Why, two middle-aged women moved there about two months ago."

"Do you know their names?"

"No, I don't. They haven't seemed very sociable, and I only see them out once in a while, so I have never been able to talk to them, only once. I invited them to call on me, but they said they weren't very strong and didn't go anywhere very often. Indeed they don't look very strong."

"About middle-aged, you say?"

"Yes. They look enough alike to be sisters."

"H'm. Mind if I take a look at your basement?"

"Certainly not, Mr. Mason."

"I'll be back after awhile." The sheriff arose and started for the basement, switching on the light at the head of the stair.

With the aid of his flashlight, Mason searched the entire basement, studying the bricks in the wall, the cement floor, and the supports of the ceiling. He had found that a space, about three feet wide and five feet high from the floor was nothing but boards.

"It's funny," Mason said to himself, "that all the rest of the wall is made of bricks and mortar, and this one space is wood."

Immediately he set about tearing the boards apart. When he had succeeded in prying loose three of them, he thrust his hand through the space. He

could feel the cool damp air strike his hand and arm. The sheriff tried, but in vain; he could not touch anything the full length of his hand and arm. Thrusting his flashlight through the hole, he was unable to see anything but blank darkness. It was just as the sheriff had suspected. Here was a tunnel from Mrs. Bronson's cellar to—where?

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE top of the tunnel was so low that Mason was forced to crawl on his hands and knees, which was a very tiresome process. At short intervals, he would stop and removing his flashlight from a hip pocket, examine the walls and top of the tunnel, and as far ahead as he could see, by the light, which he held.

Crawling ahead for some twenty or thirty yards, the sheriff leaned exhausted against one of the cool sides of the tunnel.

"I guess I'm on the right trail but I can't prove anything yet. I can only watch and wait my chance. To me, the discovery of this tunnel clears up a few things, but I'd have quite a hard pull to prove anything to a bunch of jurymen. I'll keep it to myself till I've gotten the necessary goods, and

then won't there be some explosion? The main thing is to keep the real facts from the newspapers."

Placing the heavy leather gauntlets on his hands, the sheriff resumed his crawling and forging ahead.

At last his efforts were repaid, for he had reached the foundation of the house which lay just west of that of Matilda Bronson. The house which was occupied by the non-too-sociable middle-aged women.

Bricks had been removed from the foundation, and no efforts had been made to conceal the opening to the tunnel, as had been the case at the opening into Mrs. Bronson's cellar.

With even more caution than he had practiced in the tunnel, Mason entered the basement of the strange house and listened. No sound came from the floor above. The stillness actually seemed death-like.

With keen deliberation the sheriff looked about him for a stairway, which might lead to the upper part of the house. He was treading on strange territory and great care must be taken.

"They must be upstairs somewhere," Mason said to himself as he went into an adjoining room. Here his efforts were repaid, for a stairway, evidently leading to the floor above, was at the far side of the room.

Slowly and quietly, Mason ascended the steps, one by one. Vainly he tried to open the door at the

top of the stair. Listening for any signs of life that might come from inside, the sheriff tried to lift the hook on the inside by running the flat blade of his knife up the very narrow crack in the door.

At last he was relieved to hear the faint thud of the hook as it hit the door on the opposite side. Softly the man pushed open the door and peered inside. The room seemed to be a small hallway between the kitchen and the cellar steps. More cautiously than before, Mason advanced into the kitchen. This room was well furnished and with excellent taste. If anyone had seen the sheriff's face as he stood there looking about, they would have noticed the look of utter surprise which flooded his countenance.

As he stepped on the deep-piled Turkish rug in the living room, he was greeted by his own reflection in a tall mirror over a console table. Unconscious that there were human eyes devouring his every movement, Mason stood on the threshold in dumb surprise, and surveyed the luxurious prospect of grouped easy-chairs, baby grand piano, ranked bookshelves at the farther end, and silver and glasses.

Whatever he thought the place might be like on the interior, Mason was certainly not expecting such luxurious quarters as this.

Balancing himself on the threshold of the dining

room, he looked in. This was furnished as well and showed as good taste in its arrangements as the other two rooms. It was growing quite dark, and Mason dared not turn his flashlight on too often, for fear of attracting some passerby, or the two women who occupied the house, might return; and Mason was not ready to let them know he was on their trail.

Flashing the light directly on something with which his foot had suddenly come in contact, the sheriff discovered it to be a chaise lounge. There is nothing so particularly startling about a chaise lounge alone, but this particular one held a young girl, who was apparently sleeping. She appeared to be seventeen or eighteen years of age, with a fair complexion and beautiful close-cropped wavy hair; but that wasn't the most striking thing about her hair, for it was a fiery red hue. Who was she? Where had she come from, and when? What was she doing here? Was she one of the confederates?

As Mason stood looking down into the face of the sleeping girl, the eyelids softly fluttered and then opened wide. The girl did not go into hysterics as one might expect. Instead she said in a sleepy but calm voice, "It might be more convenient if you would push the light switch beside the buffet."

Mason knew nothing else to do, but obey this pert suggestion. At once a great flood of light filled

the room. The sheriff was unaware of the deep gaze fixed upon him and not two feet from where he was standing, two eyes stared straight at his clear-cut profile.

As he moved back to the lounge, where the girl was now sitting, she swept his entire body from head to foot in one swift glance. Mason noticed the youthful curves of her face.

"Sit down! You look tired."

Mason obeyed, pulling a chair away from the table.

"Who are you, to intrude like this?"

"I am Mr. Mason."

"Well, that doesn't cut any ice. I'm the Prince of Wales."

Mason wondered at the irony of this last speech, from a girl so young in years. The two eyes, which had steadily gazed at Mason, had now disappeared.

"I came to see the two women who live here." What if she should ask how he had entered?

"I don't approve of strangers entering a darkened house, and then stand over me while I am sleeping. It is not considered good breeding for a man to make his calls as you have made yours this evening. I have a gun, and can use it considerably well. The next time I awake and find a man standing so near me, I'll plug him so full of lead he'll weigh a ton."

Mason glanced at the weapon the young girl held

in her lap. It was a revolver; a beautiful gun with a pearl handle.

Lowering her voice to barely a whisper the girl hurriedly spoke. Her voice was barely audible. "For your own sake and mine, beat it! They are after you and watching our every movement." As quickly as before, the girl's voice changed. "The ladies you have called upon are not home, and I would advise you to use the front door, and not the basement the next time you call. Come, I will show you the door." She arose and taking for granted that Mason would follow went to the door. As he turned to bid her goodbye the sheriff looked at the door in the living room, which was partly open, and there from out of the blackness, two glaring eyes stared straight into his face.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE young girl must have understood the cause of the startled look on the sheriff's face, for she mumbled in a low tone, "Please, don't come back here again," and then slammed the door in the sheriff's face. He heard a heavy lock slide into place, and all was quiet.

What was the meaning of the young girl's ac-

tions? It could have all been a fake, but Mason felt sure that the young girl was sincere in her warnings.

"Better not come back, eh? Well, I'm dad-blamed sure of coming back here, now. I'm going to thrash this thing out, if it's the last thing I do before my Judgment Day!"

Mason realized that it wasn't going to be a little task to get to the bottom of things and find proof, for he had already picked up clues. For instance, that pearl-handled revolver; if he could only get hold of it and get the correct identity of it.

He advanced to one of the dining room windows; but found the curtains tightly drawn. Crouching close to the house, he listened for any sound that might come from within.

"That's queer," he thought. "I know there's someone else, besides that young girl in there. No doubt she is one of the confederates, too."

Glancing at his watch he found it to be nearing the hour of ten, so decided to stop at Mrs. Bronson's on his way back to town. It was Barbara who answered his knock.

"We couldn't imagine what had become of you, Mr. Mason. Pat and I looked in the basement and all around the house but couldn't find you anywhere, so we decided that you had left through the outside way and had gone back to town."

Mason realized that it would be necessary to fix the boards on the west basement wall early the following morning, to keep anyone from discovering the tunnel which he had so recently found.

"I am sorry if I caused you ladies any anxiety or trouble, but I have been working on a feeble clue, which I have found."

"How did you succeed?" interrogated Mrs. Bronson.

"Very slowly, but I believe I am on the right trail and things will gradually develop as I proceed."

Upon leaving the Bronson residence, Mason did not go back to town, but turned his footsteps towards the first house west. Cautiously crouching beneath one of the living room windows, he breathlessly listened. Straining his ears, he caught the words: "Girls—bring—old lady."

"If only I could get a glimpse into that room without being seen," thought Mason.

Suddenly he saw a shaft of light shoot across the lawn, and then to the front of the house a door softly creaked and the light disappeared.

Crouching close to the ground on his stomach, Mason waited. Softly he heard footsteps coming toward him. Closer and closer they came. Mason held his breath, and not three feet away, two masculine attired feet quietly walked past him. The

sheriff waited until the footsteps died away, then rose to his feet, and quickly followed in the direction which the man had taken.

No one was in sight, but Mason could not be too careful. There was no mistake that the words which he had overheard referred to Mrs. Bronson and her two young girl companions.

Returning again to the Bronson residence, Sheriff Mason searched, but could find no trace of the man he was looking for. Seeing the house was dark and deciding that everyone had retired, Mason went back toward the main part of town.

About three o'clock in the morning, Barbara, who slept with Mrs. Bronson, awoke and saw a woman standing beside the night table at the side of the bed. She was nervously pouring a liquid from a small vial into a cloth. Surprised, Barbara sat up in bed. In the dim early morning light, she could not discern what the woman looked like. Turning, the stranger saw Barbara sitting up in the bed watching her, and with the small bottle of liquid and the saturated cloth in her hands, turned and fled toward the kitchen.

Quickly, Barbara jumped from the bed, and not wasting time to slip on her bedroom slippers, ran with bare feet into the kitchen, in pursuit of the fleeing woman.

Reaching the kitchen a few minutes after the

strange woman had entered it, Barbara was unable to find any trace of her. Nor was she successful in finding how the woman had gained her entrance and then made her escape. The screens to all of the windows were locked, and Barbara could find nothing disturbed.

It was not difficult for her to realize the strange woman's intent. She had meant to drug her; but why?

After making certain that nothing had been disturbed and that Mrs. Bronson had not been awakened, Barbara sat down to think. "I'm always too late. First, I was too late to get a good look or to hinder that man's escape with the box, and now I've let this woman get away. It's funny how she ever made such a quick escape; and why did she want to drug me? Perhaps she meant to do it to all three of us. Who could she be?"

Sleep was far from Barbara for the remainder of the night, so she dressed and read until time to prepare the breakfast. She had decided not to tell anyone of the incident of the night before. It would worry Mrs. Bronson and certainly would not do the imaginative Patricia any good. She would, however, keep a closer guard, and see if she could identify the mysterious woman.

Once during the next day Patricia had said to her, "Babs, you look awfully sleepy. Didn't you

sleep well last night?" and Barbara had answered, "Oh, yes, I slept quite well, but I read quite a little last night." And with that, no more questions were asked concerning the night before.

Mrs. Bronson gradually recuperated until she was capable of doing what little house work was required for herself. Barbara and Patricia had gone back to their own homes. Things seemed to be righting themselves once more, but the last disappointment had left Mrs. Bronson in a far worse condition than she had been before Donald was found. She knew what kind of life he had led before, and could not help but think that he had returned to his old life of crime. More time than ever before was spent with her flowers. Doctor Branner had recommended a complete change of climate, but she would not give up her flowers and home to leave.

The same far-away look that had once haunted her eyes, returned. She told Barbara and Patricia one day that she often heard Donald calling to her in the night, and when she stopped to listen, it was the man in him calling to her not to worry. She often wondered if Donald had been murdered and his body disposed of in some horrible way.

One bright afternoon in the middle part of June, while Mrs. Bronson was at the side of her house tending some flowers, a large foreign made car drove up in front of the house and stopped. A tall,

slender woman, dressed entirely in black, and with a dark veil covering her face, stepped from the car, spoke to the driver, and as the car drove on, went up the walk to Mrs. Bronson's house.

"Good afternoon," called Mrs. Bronson as she came around the side of the house.

"Good afternoon." The woman's voice was sad and kind.

"Won't you come inside? It is so warm in the sun today."

"Thank you, I shall." The woman in black followed Mrs. Bronson to the door, and Mrs. Bronson held the screen door open, allowing her to precede into the house.

"Could you please give me a drink of cool water? I have come a long distance, and am dreadfully thirsty."

"Certainly. You look tired and ought to have some rest."

Left alone, the strange woman lifted her heavy veil long enough to add another thickness of powder to her white face. When Mrs. Bronson returned with a glass of water and a pitcher of lemonade, the woman sat with her elbow on the arm of the chair, and her head resting on her hand. She appeared very fatigued.

"Thank you very much. It is so kind of you," as she set the empty glass on a table.

"It is nothing at all and you are certainly quite welcome to more lemonade."

"No, thank you. No more at present. No doubt you wonder who I am and why I have called on you, Mrs. Bronson. I have come in regard to your son."

"My son? Donald?"

"Yes. Donald Bronson. Is he not your son?"

"Yes. Oh, yes. Tell me, is he alive?"

"Don't get excited, Mrs. Bronson. Yes, your son is living, but his mind is afflicted."

"Not—crazy—mad?"

"No, but a serious operation is all that can save him."

"Where is he? I must go to him."

"Just a minute, Mrs. Bronson. I know it is hard, but I will tell you all, and then you will understand better. When your son came to me, he was in his present state of mental weakness, although his condition was not as alarming as it has since grown to be. I cared for him and watched after him, like I would want someone to watch after my own son, if he were alone in the world. I did not have the financial means to use, which such a case called for. I did, however, gain the interest of one of the best known specialists in South America, and he gave enough of his valuable time to pay Donald a visit. He——"

"Pardon me a minute, Mrs.——"

"Mrs. Warren. Joan Warren."

"Thank you. You said a specialist from South America."

"Yes. That is where your boy is."

"He needs me, and is so far away in another country."

"There, there, Mrs. Bronson. I shouldn't have come, only I thought it best that you know."

"Yes, oh, yes. I am glad that you came. What did the specialist think about Donald?"

"He advised an operation. Said that was all that could save him, for by that time Donald was steadily getting worse. He often walked around the house at night, saying he was going home. I was unable to find any street address or names to which I might refer, until three weeks ago, when I found an identification card which he had hidden, bearing your name and address.

"The specialist knew that I had no money, with which to pay for such an expensive operation, and after he had heard the story of Donald, advised me to send a cablegram to you. I felt that I must see you personally, and tell you the condition your son is in, and ask you to help him. I only wish I had the means to do more for him, but I have done all I can for Donald, Mrs. Bronson, without the operation, and that is all that can save him."

How did Donald get so far from home?"

"I do not know, but as I said before, his mind was dazed when I found him on my back porch one morning. The only fact I was able to clearly gain, was that he got on a ship and was coming home. He always says he was coming home. I thought he might have been returning to his home when his mind became afflicted. I knew nothing of his past, but that made no difference, he was a young man, and needed help. I only wish I could have helped him more."

Joan Warren was now crying. Mrs. Bronson had already been moved to tears at the story this woman in black had brought her.

"Mrs. Warren, you haven't any idea how relieved I am, to know that my son is still living, even though he is ill. My son was returning home when his mind became weakened." Then Mrs. Bronson told the story of her lost child, of his return as a man, his imprisonment, and then how she had waited in vain for his return.

A strange understanding seemed to bind these two women in silence after Mrs. Bronson finished her story.

"I thought you might think I was deceiving you, so with much effort I succeeded in getting a sample of Donald's handwriting and his photograph." She withdrew from a cheap purse a slip of paper and

handed it to the waiting woman. This is what it said:

"Home. Coming home."

"That is my boy's writing."

"This is his photo. I don't suppose he looks much like the man you last saw."

Slowly Mrs. Bronson shook her head. There were lines of torture and mental torment on the features of the face she knew to be her son. There was a wild stare in his eyes. The smile was that of a half-mad human being. The several weeks' growth of whiskers added an even more pitiful touch.

Mrs. Bronson looked at the picture long and hard, and then said, "My boy must have the best of care, that I can afford. How much will this operation cost?"

"I do not know, Mrs. Bronson. I came to you on the impulse of the moment, and did not have the time to consult the specialist."

"It will take a great amount for the operation, the hospital bill, and your traveling expenses and time."

"No, my dear woman. I do not wish you to pay my expenses. I am glad that I have been able to do that much for you."

"I am very thankful to you, Mrs. Warren, but I could not expect you to pay your own traveling ex-

penses to come here and tell me of my son and risk your own health, for I can see you are not strong."

"Well, if you insist, I will allow you to pay my expenses."

"That will satisfy me much better. How soon are you to start back?"

"I must start back tonight."

"Oh you should rest before you return."

"No, I must hurry back to your son."

"I wonder why I couldn't go—still, it will take so much for the operation. You will let me know how he is immediately after the operation?"

"Certainly."

"I have no ready cash, but I can give you oil stock."

"But could I secure the money on them?"

"That is true. I'm sure I do not know. What time do you intend leaving?"

"Ten fifty-two. Have you the stock here?"

"No. It is at the bank."

"If you will have it ready by nine thirty tonight, I shall take it, and I think I may be able to secure some cash on them in the United States."

"It will take some time, won't it?"

"I can send them in before I leave the United States and the cash can be sent to me in South America."

"I will have the stock ready tonight. As soon as

Donald is strong enough after the operation you will send him home?"

"Yes, Mrs. Bronson. I promise I will send him, as soon as he has regained his strength. I am very glad that I was able to talk with you myself. Don't worry about your son, for he will soon have had the operation, and then be on the road to recovery."

"I am so glad you came, Mrs. Warren."

Fastening her black coat more closely about her, Joan Warren made ready to leave.

"You can remain with me until time to leave to-night."

"Thank you very much, but I have so many things to look after, and much business to attend to in the short while before I leave tonight. I shall stop for the stock and bid you goodbye before I leave for South America."

In a very short while, the woman in black, sped away in the high powered, expensive automobile. A look of deep satisfaction spread over her face as she told the driver of the car how easily Matilda Bronson had swallowed the hook, bait, sinker and all.

CHAPTER XXX

"You let that woman get away with all your oil stock last night?" eagerly queried Barbara, as if she thought she hadn't heard Mrs. Bronson correctly.

"I didn't let her get away with it, Babs, I gave it to her to help my own son."

Barbara knew more than Mrs. Bronson or even Patricia suspected. She had not forgotten the incident of a few nights before. Mrs. Bronson's description of the woman in black coincided with that of the woman who had attempted to drug her, not so many nights ago.

"That was all a fake story. It was just a scheme to get that oil stock, and you let that woman have them. There is a whole gang of them and that is why they stole the black boxes. They thought the oil stock was in one of them. That woman who gave her name as Joan Warren is one of that gang and she has gotten away with the stock. Mrs. Bronson, with or without your permission, I'm turning this case over to Sheriff Mason immediately. If he can capture that woman and the confederate at the wheel of the car, he can then, no doubt, find trace of your son's real whereabouts."

Hat in hand, and hair flying, Barbara ran out the door and down the street.

"I can't believe that she would deceive me. She, herself looked so pitiful and fatigued, and then, too, she had Donald's picture and a sample of his writing."

"I, too, believe that Joan Warren and the driver of the car are confederates of a gang of thieves who have caused all the trouble. One of that gang more than likely committed the murder, and I believe they are at the base of all this trouble and tragedy.

"It would be easy enough for them to secure Donald's picture and writing, if they have him under their rule. They may have waylaid him on his way home from prison, and tried to force him to tell where your stock was hidden. He may have told them that they were in one of the black boxes, for it is plain to see they were after something in the box and that they wanted to lay their hands on that stock.

"When they found nothing of value to them in either box, they next tried another plan, which seems to have worked very well. If such a gang has captured Donald and have him at their mercy isn't it possible that they could put him through such mental torture that the photograph could easily coincide with the woman's story? They have quite a little start, but if Sheriff Mason only can secure a high powered

car and start right away, he more than likely can trace them down. He will notify all the towns around and they can be on the lookout for them. It may be a good thing after all, that they got the stock, for now the sheriff can run them down and then probably find Donald."

"I can understand now that she must have not told me the truth. She never once lifted her veil from her face, that showed that she didn't want her face to be familiar to me. She was a smart one, the way she could talk. Isn't it possible that the man down at the jail is one of this gang?"

"Barbara has identified him as the men who stole one of your boxes, the night after the murder. He refuses to say anything that can help, but he has confessed to stealing a box from your house. He told Barbara something, but I don't know what it was. I think that Mrs. Warren was a fake. Sam may have told her something about the woman."

"There comes Barbara now. I wonder if she found Sheriff Mason?"

Barbara was about to open the gate in front of Mrs. Bronson's house, that she might enter, when her attention was attracted next door. When she had reached the door of Mrs. Bronson's house her mind was still in a turmoil. It was very strange, indeed, that one of the reserved and quiet women, who occupied the house west of Mrs. Bronson's

should be seen entering her home through a side window, feet first.

The expression on Barbara's face, as she entered the living room, must have given a hint of her humorous but puzzled mood.

"What are you laughing at, Babs?" queried Patricia as Barbara entered the room.

"Laughing? I didn't know I was laughing."

"She was, wasn't she, Mrs. Bronson?"

"Yes. I myself, noticed the broad smile you wore when you came up on the porch."

"The ayes have it. I was unconsciously smiling, but quite a funny scene greeted me as I entered your front gate."

"Funny? What was it?"

"One of the ladies, living next door, was crawling in her house through a basement window."

"Through a window?" echoed Patricia.

"Yes. Actually crawling through, feet first."

"Well, I do declare," exclaimed Mrs. Bronson.

"What could she have been doing, crawling through the window?"

"She may have lost her key, or left it somewhere, and finding herself locked out, did the next best thing, and gained entrance by crawling through a window."

"That seems logical; and whatever the reason may have been, it was a funny sight to behold."

"What did you find out at town?" interrogated Mrs. Bronson.

"Sheriff Mason and another man have gone after the woman and man, and Mr. Mason said he would notify you as soon as he caught them. They were going to stop in Brownville and get a faster car. The man and woman have twelve hours' start on Sheriff Mason, but if he notifies the other towns he may be able to catch them. Did the woman give any hint of where their destination might be?"

"Not unless it would be—South America."

"Oh surely not. They are probably somewhere in the United States; but where?"

This was a question which would be difficult to answer. Could Sheriff Mason have put his finger down on the spot where Joan Warren and her accomplice were located, he would have received the surprise of his life.

CHAPTER XXXI

SEVERAL days passed, and at last a week had slowly dragged away; and still no word had been received from Sheriff Mason. The entire town of Bradford anxiously waited a message or the return

of the sheriff. Barbara and Patricia were as puzzled as the rest of the citizens.

"A letter for you, Babs," said Mrs. Hunt one morning as she brought the mail in from the porch.

"For me? Oh good," as she laid aside the dress which she was hemming.

"It is post-marked New York. It must be from your Aunt Katherine."

Excitedly Barbara opened the envelope. "Why, it is from Aunt Kate, Mother, and look!" Eagerly she thrust the paper into her mother's hands, and then looked over her shoulder as Mrs. Hunt read:

MR. AND MRS. RAND STUART
request the pleasure of
MISS BARBARA HUNT'S
company at a dance in honor of their daughter,
MISS MARCIA STUART,
on Friday, the first of July,
at the Vandetour
Kindly send response to
Twelve North First Street.

"Oh Mother, I would so like to go."

"Wait, here is a note from Katherine." Then Mrs. Hunt read aloud the letter which was inclosed with the invitation. She seemed as eager as Barbara over her daughter's first formal invitation.

"DEAR SISTER:

I am inclosing an invitation to Barbara and hope she will accept it.

Marcia and I would love to have her spend the first week (or longer) of July with us. I realize that July is not the ideal month to spend in the city, but part of the time will be spent in the country or wherever else Barbara would choose to go.

Several formal and informal functions are planned for the first two weeks in July, and Marcia would like nothing better than to introduce Barbara to her friends at this time.

I hope you are all well and are enjoying this ideal weather. Please do not disappoint us, for we shall expect Barbara soon.

Lovingly,

Your sister, KATHERINE."

Barbara clasped the precious invitation close to her heart and then re-read it and the letter, as if she could hardly believe the truth.

"Isn't that lovely of Aunt Katherine and Marcia? I would like to go only——"

"I see no reason why you can't. I am sure your father will approve of it, and I myself think it gorgeous, your first formal affair."

Mrs. Hunt smiled as she thought of her own girlhood. "You will meet new friends of Marcia's

younger set and the more aristocratic friends of Katherine and your Uncle Rand. I wonder if Marcia isn't going away to school; they are giving the dance for her."

"She has been studying art, hasn't she?"

"Yes. I wouldn't wonder that she is going abroad. How old is she now?"

"Why, she must be about nineteen. That seems terribly young to be going abroad to study art."

"You must remember, dear, that she has always attended a high class exclusive girls' school. That would make a great difference. Young society girls always start their art careers at a youthful age. Oh, I just know you will have a lovely time! My! We'll have to get busy. It's only about eighteen days until the first of July. We must send Katherine your acceptance right away."

"But, Mother, New York is a long way off."

"Oh, not so far. Rand or Katherine would be at the station to meet you, of course; and there is nothing difficult in buying your ticket and getting on the train here at Bradford."

"There will be clothes, Mother. I will need formal and the necessities that go with them; an evening wrap and lots of other things that a person never would need in Bradford."

"If clothes is what bothers you, you might as well stop sighing. Just because such things as a tuxedo,

evening gown, or formal aren't worn in Bradford is no reason why you shouldn't have them to wear in New York City. Do you really want to go, Babs?"

"Oh yes. With all my heart I want to go; but I am afraid you will hurry too much to get my things ready."

"Never you worry about the preparations. The best thing you can do at present, is to go sit down and write a note to Katherine, accepting the invitation. Tell her we will let her know the exact time of your arrival at a later date. While you are writing the note I will make a list of what you must take with you."

The days that followed were spent in preparation for Barbara's first trip to the great city and visit to her relatives.

Everything from dainty, flimsy underthings to beautiful, yet simple formal dresses including sport and morning frocks were packed away in a new and shining trunk.

One morning while Barbara was packing a cool little crepe dress into the trunk, her mother said, "Patricia thinks that it is great that you are going."

"Yes," returned Barbara. "She is going camping during the time that I am gone."

"That will be nice."

"When you spoke of Pat, I happened to think

about the girl that lives in the white house west of Mrs. Bronson. She seems perfectly adorable."

"I thought two women lived there alone."

"So did I, but this young girl stays there now. I saw her yesterday when I went over to Mrs. Bronson's. I don't know who she is or anything about her, but she looked so well cultured and refined. I thought she might be visiting those two ladies. I would like to make her acquaintance before I leave."

"That would have to be mighty soon, dear, for you leave day after tomorrow."

"That would be pretty soon. You will let me know about any interesting news or discoveries won't you?"

"Certainly, and you must find some time in all your activities to write to me."

The next day, which was the day before Barbara's departure, Sheriff Mason returned with an interesting story, a great disappointment, but nothing more.

He had traced Joan Warren and her chauffeur to the Canadian border and thence to New York, where he lost all trace of them. In New York City, he was aided by the police force and several plain-clothes men.

Mason detested the idea of giving up the search but it seemed the only probable thing to do, when the New York City police force were unable to find any trace of the couple.

The sheriff had made a thorough search of New York, from the society district to the dives and hide-outs of the slums. Joan Warren and her confederates had evidently skipped the country, taking with them Mrs. Bronson's oil stock—all that she had left in the world, excepting her home.

Katherine Stewart and her daughter had been very pleased to receive Barbara's acceptance of their invitation. They immediately telegraphed back to Mrs. Hunt that they would meet Barbara at the station whenever she could best make arrangements to come.

The morning of Barbara's departure dawned bright and clear. It was an ideal day for traveling. Mr. Hunt checked her trunk and the entire Hunt household was in a stir and hustle.

Barbara was so excited that she wasn't of much help, and it was her mother who made the last minute preparations.

"Are you quite sure that everything is packed, Babs?"

"I don't believe I have forgotten anything."

"Did you put your tennis racquet in?"

"Yes. Of course I wouldn't forget that."

"And your swimming togs?"

"Yes, Mumsy, yes. I don't think I have forgotten a thing, and especially my swimming outfit."

"Well, you had better get ready now. I laid your suit, shoes, and hat on the bed in your room. You mustn't forget your purse. I will tell your father to get the car out of the garage so he can take you to the train. Don't hurry; you have plenty of time."

These were the instructions that any mother would be apt to give, under the same circumstances.

Barbara looked sweet in a light, rose-bluish skirt and jacket, tan pumps, and a tan, swagger, felt hat. In spite of her many efforts to prevent it, her hair curled in tiny ringlets about her face.

Mrs. Bronson, Patricia, and Barbara's father and mother were at the train to bid her goodbye. It was a fight for Patricia to keep the tears back. Not because she was selfish or jealous that Barbara was leaving, but because it was hard to look forward to being separated from her friend for a week.

The sound of the whistle startled Patricia as she looked up and saw Barbara smiling at her from a window in the train. Tears were streaming down her cheeks as she called to her companion, "I wish you were going too, Pat. I would enjoy myself much more."

The train was slowly moving and before it had rounded a curve, Barbara looked back and saw her beloved friend standing on the platform, waving a last farewell.

Barbara settled herself comfortably for the trip to the happy and good times that were in store for her.

CHAPTER XXXII

As the train neared the Grand Central Station, Barbara found herself wondering what her cousin Marcia would be like. She had seen her once, but she was only ten then, and nine years could bring many changes.

Marcia, Barbara knew, had everything a young girl could wish for, and would some day inherit a nice sized fortune for her own. She might not care for outdoor activities such as tennis, golfing, and swimming. Barbara pictured her cousin as being pretty, well refined and with a haughty bearing.

"I won't care how haughty and dignified she is, just so she isn't too selfish and snobbish," Barbara thought.

Gradually the train decreased its momentum. Desperately Barbara jabbed at the unruly curls and adjusted her felt hat. The train gave a sudden jerk and stopped. Slowly and a little nervously Barbara walked to the front of the train. Hardly had she reached the doorway when a pair of strong mascu-

line arms clasped about her waist and lifted her up.

"Why, Uncle Rand! How did you know me?"

"You're the living image of your mother. Isn't she, Kate?"

But Katherine Stuart did not answer the question, for she had lovingly clasped Barbara in her arms, and was smothering her with kisses.

"Mother, will you kindly give me a chance to see my own cousin?"

The two girls looked straight into each other's eyes, and Barbara knew that her misgivings concerning her cousin were all false.

"Next!" as Marcia Stuart kissed her cousin full on the lips—the proper place for osculation.

"You don't mind if I call you Barbie, do you?"

"Certainly not. I much prefer a nickname."

"There!" and she cast an I-told-you-so look at her mother.

"You girls can exchange ideas and get acquainted when we reach the car. Did you have your luggage checked, Barbara?"

"Yes, Aunt Katherine."

"We will go on over to the car. Mr. Stuart is taking lunch downtown."

Marcia took hold of Barbara's left hand while her Aunt took the right.

"You can call me Mark. Mother doesn't like it, but Dad and I do, so it's two to one."

"It's too much of a boy's name; I suppose that is why I can't make myself like it. I like for Marcia to be feminine, but if I don't keep a close watch, the first thing I know, Mr. Stuart is taking her to prize fights and such things, when she ought to be home entertaining dinner guests."

"But I love the fights, Mother; it's grand sport." Then directing her question to Barbara, she asked, "Have you ever been to a prize fight?"

"No, but I have thought I should like to go sometime to see what they are like."

"There's a big one on some night this week, and if Mother doesn't object, I'll have Dad take us. I'm sure you'd like them."

"Here is the car, Barbara."

The chauffeur opened the door, and Barbara sank down into the deep cushions of the car.

"I must telegraph Mother, Aunt Katherine, for she will worry until she hears from me."

"Your Uncle Rand is going to send a telegram to your mother on his way to lunch."

"I must thank him when he comes home. He will save me the trouble of telegraphing, and Mother must know that I arrived all right."

"Barbara is tired and I think we should go right home, unless you have some shopping to do, Marcia."

"I haven't any shopping and I am ready to go home if Barbara is."

The car, under the steady guidance of the capable Gerald, wound its way in and out of the heavy traffic.

"Would you like to go out in the country after lunch and have a swim, Barbie?"

Mrs. Stuart answered for Barbara. "Barbara is tired, Marcia dear, and I think she would rather rest this afternoon and tonight. Tomorrow you may go to the country and do whatever else you may choose."

"If you will excuse me, Marcia, I think I will rest this afternoon and go to the country tomorrow. I didn't think I was tired until I reached the car."

"I should have stopped to think that you are tired and should rest. As soon as you feel like it, I want you to meet some of my friends. There are some that I want you to meet before the dance Friday night. I know they will all just love you." Marcia squeezed her cousin's hand in true affection. "Please, Barbie, call me Mark."

"All right, Mark. How's that?"

"Fine!" returned her cousin, as her smile broadened, showing a row of pretty white teeth.

The car entered a broad driveway and stopped. Barbara saw before her a beautiful large house.

"What a lovely house," she thought to herself.

"And I am to spend a whole week in it, surrounded by such adorable relatives as Uncle Rand, Aunt Katherine, and Marcia."

"Here's the old homestead, Barbie."

"I was just admiring it. I think it is lovely."

"I am glad you like it, Barbara," said Mrs. Stuart.

Barbara's trunk and hatbox had arrived at the Stuart residence and were sent up to her room. When her Aunt Katherine showed her to her room it was hard for Barbara to keep from going into ecstasy, it was so pretty and furnished with such excellent taste.

The waxed floor was largely covered by a carpet rug of deep taupe. The walls were papered with an enchanting reproduction of toile design, patterned with eighteenth century shepherds, and shepherdesses posed against a deep old-rose background. A modest bed from rural France was placed in a shallow recess beneath a simple canopy. A writing table was placed at right angles to the large window, shadowed by Venetian blinds. Drawn close to the window was an ample bergere of Louis XVI design, and placed by the bedside was a most unusual armchair covered in fresh pink and cream striped damask with a suggestion of spring flowers. The opposite end of the room had no window but a cross-corner mantel in black and white, and a hearth in black and yellow marble. Quaint em-

broidered birds and little silhouettes hung on the wall to either side of the mantel. A chair drawn up to the right of the fireplace was in dull green, brocaded in a gold pattern; across from it a little armchair was covered in cut velvet of a dark red tone. The dressing table to the left of the fireplace was flanked by two chiffoniers of Louis XVI design. The bench which accompanied the dressing table was a reproduction of an early English joint stool, or tavern table. The furniture, drape and rug spoke of comfort, elegance and beauty. A mirror-panelled door when opened revealed a fresh, shining bath room.

Barbara's maid, Mitzi, was soon removing her pretty frocks from the trunk and hanging them up.

In the afternoon while Barbara reposed on the chaise lounge, Marcia sat on a low stool at her side. They talked about all that had happened to each other and all that had taken place during the nine years that had lapsed since they had last met.

Barbara loved to hear her cousin tell of the delightful parties and dances, her school life and the career which she hoped to gain in the future.

Although her friends and close associates were the petted sons and daughters of New York's rich, and she herself an heiress, Marcia Stuart was different. She believed all the noble rich to be insane. "Money is their God," she had said to Barbara that

afternoon. She knew that money had a value but that the true value could not be recognized unless one worked to earn the money.

Everyone of the "gang," as Marcia termed her group of intimate friends, admired her for her outlook on life and the goal she had determined to reach.

"I expect to make a career for myself, Barbie, and really earn some money of my own. Mother and Dad are wonderful to me, but they don't understand. I sometimes wonder if I appreciate them, as much as I should."

Barbara felt sorry for this young girl who was really living a double life. To all appearances, she was just another rich heiress but deep in her heart she was living the life of an ambitious-hearted American girl.

In deep interest, she listened to Barbara tell of long country hikes, of happy summer days and beautiful starlit nights in Girl Scout camps. She even had Barbara show her how to roll a blanket pack, and how to tie knots. Barbara was delighted at Marcia's keen enthusiasm and eagerness, and she told her all about Patricia and what a true friend she had been.

"You are certainly a lucky girl, Barbie. I thought my life had been very eventful but you have put it all over on me."

Barbara wondered if she should tell Marcia the mystery of the black box. Seeing no reason why it should do any harm, she told her cousin all from the very beginning to the very sight of the strange girl at the house next to Mrs. Bronson just before her departure.

Marcia was so impressed that she looked at Barbara in open admiration.

"That is simply wonderful. I do hope that you and your friend solve the mystery."

"Thank you. I hope that Mrs. Bronson has found her son when I return."

After dinner that evening Mr. and Mrs. Stuart, Barbara and Marcia sat talking in the library. Many times Marcia thought of the story that her cousin had told her that afternoon.

Barbara retired about ten o'clock, only to awaken at three in the morning from a jumble of dreams. What was that last dream that had so excited her? Oh, she knew; she had just met the strange girl living next to Mrs. Bronson, but she was wearing a mask!

CHAPTER XXXIII

BARBARA slept late the morning following her arrival in New York. Marcia was eating breakfast when she reached the dining room.

"Good morning, Babsie. You look much more rested than you did last night."

"I slept well last night and now this morning I feel more like myself." Noticing the beautiful golden sunshine which was streaming through the French doors and lighting up the floor, she said, "What a beautiful morning, I hope the weather will be nice for your dance tomorrow night."

"Thank you, Barbie. A change of weather could not prevent the dance, but it is always much more of a success if it is a beautiful night."

"For the rest of the morning we will go shopping and I'll show you all the cute little shops that have perfectly marvelous style creations, nobby little sport frocks, and almost everything else you can think of. We can take lunch at the Casino and then come back home and change our clothes and then go to the country and have a swim."

Barbara smiled with joy at the happy prospects set before her. "That meets with my approval and

certainly sounds alluring. I'll have just loads to write to Pat and Mother tonight."

"Good morning, Barbara." Mrs. Stuart was standing in the doorway, smiling at her daughter and niece.

"Good morning, Aunt Katherine."

"Did you sleep well last night?"

"Yes, very well, thank you. Mark has been telling me what we were going to do today."

"What is that?" Then answering her own question, "Swimming, I suppose."

"Oh yes, and we are going to shop."

Mrs. Stuart was pleased to see the enthusiasm on her niece's face. "You will want the car, Marcia?"

"Yes, for the morning. I'll drive this afternoon. Will you please tell Gerald to have the car ready at eleven, Mother? Barbie and I must get ready."

"Yes, the car will be ready. Will you be home for lunch?"

"No, we are going to the Casino. Can't you come along, Mother?"

"I would like to, but I have some correspondence to attend to and several other odd things to look after. You girls run along and have a nice time."

"If you get ready before I do, come on in," said Marcia as she and Barbara reached the top of the stairs.

"All right, and if you get ready before I, you come in my room."

Barbara tapped at the door just as Marcia was powdering her face.

"It's Bab."

"Come on in Barbie, the door isn't locked." As Barbara opened the door and entered Marcia turned around and exclaimed, "How cool and sweet you look, Barbie; and what a beautiful frock! Do you have your dresses styled and created especially for yourself?"

Barbara was more than pleased with this and said, "Mother designs my clothes and generally makes them herself, but a dressmaker helped her to sew these which I brought with me."

"Your mother must be wonderful to design such dresses as that. I like the simplicity of it and the color is excellent. It is almost eleven o'clock, so I suppose Gerald will be waiting. Let's go. All aboard," and in good companionship, she put her arm through Barbara's and together they went down the broad stair and out the door to where the chauffeur was waiting with the car.

In their happy shopping jaunt, the girls went from one dress shop to millinery shops and thence to antique shops, in search of various bric-a-brac.

Barbara was delighted with the fair mannequins and the beautiful dresses which they displayed. The

girls laughed, talked, walked, rode and shopped. One o'clock found them at the Casino. Barbara was enjoying herself immensely.

"This is where most of the gang usually eat." Hardly had the words left her mouth before a short heavy-set young man strolled up to the table occupied by the two girls.

"Hi, Mark," was his greeting. "I hope I'm not intruding on your little party," and he cast a frank inquisitive glance at Barbara, who smiled back, knowing that he must be one of Marcia's friends.

"Hello, Freddy. Won't you join us? We were just ready to have lunch."

"Thanks, Mark. I'll have a chair, but I just finished my lunch and you know I must watch my calories." Pulling a chair from the table he sat down.

"Barbara, may I present Frederick Marcus Harper?" A smile played around Marcia's mouth as she spoke the young man's full name.

"How do you do?"

"You can call me Freddy. Everyone does."

"This is my cousin, Freddy, that I told you was coming to visit us."

"Well, well. I suppose you two have been buying the stores out. Seems to me you have got more clothes now, Mark, than you know what to do with."

"There you go again. Girls have to have lots

of clothes, Freddy. Wait until I open my own little studio, then I'll be mighty glad to have one new smock in two months. Did you see your father about starting your business?"

"My what? Oh, yes, my business. No, I haven't, Mark. I just thought there was plenty of time ahead of me to start to work so I thought I'd wait awhile before I talked business to the old man."

"But there isn't plenty of time, Freddy. Now is the time to prepare for the future."

"I can't see it that way, Mark. I've tried, but I believe in living down the present and letting the future take care of itself."

"What would you do if your father stopped your allowance?"

"Why ask me that? He hasn't stopped it and when he does I'll find something to do."

"I guess my little lectures never help you any, Freddy. Why aren't you more practical; take John Madison for instance. He is working on an invention that will some day make him famous."

"Oh hang John Madison and his infernal invention! Why must you always bring him up as such a high standard example? He's wasting his best years on the invention of his, and then when it is completed, if ever it is, he'll be so old and grizzled that he won't be able to enjoy the money and fame it will bring him." No sooner had Freddy spoken

the words than he was sorry, for he saw that he had hurt Marcia. "Would it make any difference to you if I made good, Mark?"

"You know it would, Freddy. I always admire anyone who has the pluck to forge ahead in the business world."

"That's all I need. I can make as much out of myself as John Madison ever attempted to do."

The waiter brought the order, and after he had left, Freddy went on with the conversation. "John Madison has oftentimes been considered a back number but in your sight he is as great as a mountain and I as insignificant as an ant hill."

"It isn't that, Freddy, and you haven't the right to say it, but I do admire Mr. Madison and I don't care who knows it."

"I intend to make good, Mark, and then I can thank you for it. Say, won't Dad be surprised when I ask him to loan me sufficient capital to start a business of my own?"

"I know he will be glad to do it, Freddy, and I wish you all the luck in the world."

That's mighty good of you, Mark, and I won't forget it."

Barbara had found much in the conversation to interest her. In the first place it brought out another fine trait and more of the unselfish ways of her

cousin; and in the second place she knew how Freddy Harper admired Marcia.

Lunch over they made ready to leave.

"Want me to drive you home?" queried Freddy.

"No, thanks. Gerald is waiting outside with the car. You're coming out for a swim this afternoon, of course?"

"No, I won't be there today. I'm going to see Dad about my business. I'll see you tomorrow night though. Thanks for the advice, Mark. No more I.O.U's for little Freddy. He walked across the street to where his long, low roadster was parked.

"I don't see how Freddy Harper will stand to miss an afternoon of pleasure," said Marcia on the way home.

"He is queer, isn't he?"

"Yes, Barbie, he is. I don't believe his parents understand him. I do hope that I will be successful in making him do something more than invent ways to spend his father's money."

By three o'clock the two girls were speeding along a country highway in Marcia's roadster.

"I hope I get a couple of letters from Mother and Pat this evening or in the morning."

"Do you suppose that Mrs. Bronson has found her son yet and the mystery been solved?"

"I'm sure I don't know, but I do hope that Mrs. Bronson has found her son. She is such a nice old

woman that it is a shame for her to suffer so. Is that your country place straight ahead?"

"Yes, that's it."

The Stuart's country place was open the entire summer months, and Marcia's friends could come and go to their liking.

There was a private golf course, tennis courts, and a swimming pool on the grounds. Mr. Stuart also had some of the best horses and stables for miles around. No wonder that this was a favorite rendezvous for Marcia's younger set.

Several cars were parked in the driveway, when Barbara and Marcia arrived.

"Would you like to see the house and grounds before you take a swim?"

"Yes, I should like to walk and look around awhile."

"We can leave our suits and tennis racquets in the car until we come back. We'll be coming back over this way again before we swim."

On the way to the house they saw a young girl and a man slowly walking toward them.

"Here comes Alice Grey, who is studying interior decorating and landscape gardening. She is very popular and—but my goodness, I do believe she is with John Madison." Hello, Alice. How do you do, Mr. Madison? Alice, this is my cousin, Barbara Hunt. Barbara—Mr. Madison."

Barbara tried to speak, but the words stuck in her throat. Her face turned white and her mouth quivered. What could the strange girl in the house west of Mrs. Bronson be doing in New York City as a friend of Marcia Stuart? Alice Grey was the strange girl that Barbara had seen in Bradford a short while before her departure.

CHAPTER XXXIV

BARBARA recovered quickly, but not before the other three had noticed the palor of her face and the quiver of her lips.

"It must be the heat," exclaimed Alice Grey. "Several women fainted in the store this morning."

"I don't believe it was the heat that bothered Miss Hunt," said John Madison. "Something frightened her."

"Frightened her? What could it have been?"

"Feeling better, Barbie?"

"Yes. I'm quite all right now. It was foolish of me, Mark, and I tried, but I couldn't help it."

"Of course you couldn't," comforted Alice Grey, little knowing that she herself was the cause for Barbara suddenly growing faint. "Poor dear. When did she arrive, Mark?"

"Yesterday morning."

"Where did you say she was from?"

"A small town in Ohio; Bradford by name."

Alice Grey gave a sudden start and glanced down at the face of the girl lying on the grass. The action was so quick that no one noticed it. Barbara, however, was eagerly listening to every word. Her eyes were closed, so that she was unable to see the change of expression on Alice Grey's face.

"Don't you think Miss Hunt should go over to the house and rest awhile, Miss Stuart?"

"That probably would be the best. Do you feel like walking the rest of the way to the house, Barbie?"

Barbara sat in an upright position and then spoke, "I feel better now. Mark was going to show me the house and then we were going for a swim. I'm sorry I acted so, just when I was about to meet two of Mark's friends." John Madison assisted her to her feet.

"Don't worry about that, Barbara. You had better keep out of the sun as much as possible. Mr. Madison and I were just going back to town. We came out a short while before lunch. Can't you and Barbara come over tonight, Mark?"

"Thank you, Alice, but Dad is having dinner guests tonight, and I rather think Mother wants me to help entertain them."

"You must bring Barbara and come over soon. Say, what are you going to wear to Margaret's tea Saturday afternoon?"

"I haven't decided as yet. If it's as warm as it is this afternoon, I am going to wear the coolest dress I have."

"Mr. Madison must be getting impatient to get back to town, so I must go. If I don't get to talk to you tomorrow afternoon, I'll see you in the evening. I'm very glad to have met you, Barbara."

"Thank you. It has been a pleasure to meet both you and Mr. Madison."

John Madison took Barbara's hand and smiling down at her said, "I hope to see you again, Miss Hunt, when I can talk to you longer."

When Barbara and Marcia reached the porch, Marcia said, "I believe you have made quite a hit with John Madison, Babs."

"What makes you think that?"

"Mr. Madison has been somewhat girl-shy. That is why I was surprised to see him out here with Alice Grey. He was quite flattering in expressing his wish to see you again."

"*Allons donc!*" Barbara exclaimed in French.

"That was an act of politeness, nothing more."

"Politeness for some, but John Madison was sincere in expressing his wish."

"Jealous?" teased Barbara.

"Why shouldn't I be? I have used every possible tactic and done everything I can think of to receive his attentions but he remains his same distant self."

Barbara laughed and Marcia joined her.

After seeing every room in the house from cellar to garret, they went to the swimming pool which was south of the house a short distance.

"Did you say that Alice Grey was an art friend?" Barbara was adjusting her cap and putting the finishing touches to her swimming garb before taking to the water.

"Yes; she is going abroad when I do. What do you think of her?"

"She seems very nice and I believe I am going to like her fine."

"I thought you would. She is very popular with her set and is certainly making excellent progress in art. She spent the winter in the South and didn't return home until a few days before you came. Her parents were terribly worried about her, for they expected her home the first of last month. Are you about ready?"

"Just a minute."

"You must be putting on more powder. Don't worry, John Madison won't be back here again to-day."

"Yes," giggled Barbara. "But I must make a good impression on your other friends."

"You don't have to put powder on to impress them. They will like you if your face is as shiny as a new dollar. Every one of them will be sure to fall in love with you." As Barbara opened the door to her dressing room and stepped out into the hallway Marcia exclaimed, "How cute your bathing suit is, Barbie!"

"I'm glad you like it. It is plain, but I simply can't swim in anything frilly or fancy."

"Here's the shower."

"Yea, for Mark!" came the cry as Marcia and Barbara came in plain sight of the pool. Barbara walked around the edge to where the diving tower was located and quickly mounted the ladder. As she stood poised ready to dive, she became aware that all eyes were turned toward her. As she cut the water, Barbara heard the cry, "Bravo!" Could that cry be for her? If so, why?

In a comparably short length of time, Barbara learned the reason for the cheering.

"An excellent dive, Miss Hunt; I wish to congratulate you. You have earned the distinction and honor of being the first girl to dive from the utmost top of the tower." The speaker was a boy who looked to be about eighteen years of age.

Barbara was overwhelmed at first. Why, these girls must indeed be tenderfoots. What would the

girls back home think of a perfectly normal girl who couldn't dive from that height?

The young boy, noticing what he thought was embarrassment, said, "I'm Billy Roe, and have the distinction of being the best swimmer and diver around here so naturally when I saw your excellent dive, I had to tell you that you deserved some praise. Now that was a pretty dive and I don't know as I can do any better but I'd like to defend my swimming title. I'll race you across the two shortest sides; that's the east and west."

Barbara was surprised at this proposition and didn't know just what to do. Turning, she saw Marcia at the edge of the pool, some distance away.

"Go on, Babs," she called.

"Come on, Babs, show him up," called a flaming-haired youth who was standing behind Barbara.

"Let's see what you can do," called one of the girls.

"See, they all want to witness a good race. Have you made up your mind yet?" Billy Roe smiled mischievously at the girl who was softly paddling about in the water.

Barbara thought of what Patricia would do if she were here. "She'd probably give some witty remark and not hesitate a minute before starting the race. Why shouldn't I?" Smiling back at the boy before her she said, "It's a go."

"Hot Tamale, I thought you would. Hey, Smith, come here."

Barbara saw a young man who was sitting along the side of the pool, remove his gay colored beach coat and take to the water.

"Here's yours truly," he said, as he came up alongside of Billy and Barbara.

"Miss Hunt, Mr. Smith."

"Thanks, old top, but I've met Miss Hunt before."

"Where?" queried Billy in surprise.

"Never mind where. I suppose you want me to give you a good send-off on this race?"

"Just exactly what I wanted. Are you ready, Miss Hunt?"

"Yes, if you are."

"Where are you starting from?" queried Smith.

"From the east side across to the west and then back again."

"Why not start from the north and swim across to the south side?" asked Barbara.

"That's the longest side," answered Billy.

"What difference does that make if it's to be a race?"

"Can you hold out that far?"

"I can try. It will be easier than swimming across the other side, and then going back again."

Billy smiled in assent and the three swam to the north side of the pool.

As Barbara stood poised on the side of the pool, she saw John Madison sitting on a bench a short distance from the pool. "I thought he had to hurry back to town on business."

"On your mark, get set, go!"

Barbara got a wonderful start and knew she must be in the lead from the number of shouts coming from the spectators. Her stroke was perfect and her breathing was even. She was making wonderful progress. Barbara quickened her stroke and shot through the water like a young fish. Oh, this was grand. It seemed to Barbara as she flashed through the cool water, that she was in Bradford again, enjoying the sports and thrills that she had taken part in many times. She thought of Alice Grey. Why had she been in Bradford when she was thought to be in the South? How strange that Barbara should meet the very girl whom she had wished to meet before leaving Bradford, in New York City! Marcia had told her that Alice was studying art, was clever and very popular. "I'm going to write Pat a letter and see what she thinks about it, just as soon as I get back to Aunt Katherine's," Barbara thought to herself. Then she wondered how near the opposite side of the pool she was. Looking up she saw a short distance ahead of her, Billy Roe, and a shorter distance ahead of him, the goal which marked the end of the race.

"Oh, I can't let him beat me when we're so near the end." Barbara did not feel the least bit tired and put a hard determination in every stroke.

Billy was fatigued and his strokes were weak. He turned his head just enough to see Barbara shoot up alongside of him. In vain he tried to increase his speed enough to gain on her. The crowd standing along the sides of the pool cheered Barbara to give her courage. They jumped up and down and clapped their hands, but the courageous girl was dumb to all sound. When victory seemed closest to Barbara, and she was gaining fast she suddenly seemed to weaken and the frenzied crowd saw a young, tired boy reach the side of the pool a little before a smiling girl. Marcia threw a warm cape around Barbara's shoulders and affectionately squeezed her arm.

"You were great," said Billy Roe, as he shook Barbara's hand. "You're the first girl that ever received my congratulations."

"Thank you, very much." Barbara smiled as pleasantly as if she had triumphed instead of met defeat.

"But it wasn't fair," broke in one of the girls. "Billy is a boy and is stronger than Barbara and besides he's used to this pool and she's not. She had more wind and wasn't half so nervous when she reached this end of the pool as Billy was. He may

have gotten here before she did, but she's the best swimmer anyway." The girl moved nearer to Barbara's side and looked straight at Billy Roe, with a look of plain defiance.

Barbara turned and smiled at the girl who had tried to defend her. "No," she said. "You are wrong. Billy is the fastest swimmer and you know this was a race, and not a test to see who was the best swimmer. I have no alibi for my defeat; Billy won, not because he is a boy and is stronger than I, but because he is the fastest swimmer."

This incident of the afternoon and Barbara's good sportsmanship won a place for her in the hearts of every member of Marcia's younger set. Unconsciously Barbara had set a high standard for these young modern men and women, and they each one admired her for her straight-forwardness and true sincerity.

"Barbie," said Marcia, on the way back to the bustle and stir of the city. "Barbie, why did you deliberately let Billy Roe beat you this afternoon?"

"Let him beat me?"

"Yes. You would have won, but you deliberately allowed him to gain on you when you were winning and holding out fine. I think that only Marion, that was the girl that said she thought you were the best swimmer, and I were the only ones who

noticed it, but you weren't a bit tired, Barbie, and your strokes were even, while Billy was fatigued and not holding up nearly as well as you. When you saw that he couldn't gain for himself, you simply permitted him to go ahead of you and win the race. He's so big-headed that he would never notice that you could have won and if he did know it, he's so fond of triumph that he would never say anything about it." Marcia ended by giving a vicious twist at the steering wheel of the car.

"I don't say that I could have won, Marcia, and I don't say that I couldn't, but it would never do for a girl to beat Billy Roe at swimming. The only way to do to that kind of people, is to let them go until some worthy person defeats them, and then they will have learned a lesson. As I said before, it would not do for a girl to defeat Billy Roe; it would hurt his pride too much."

Marcia looked at her cousin so long and intently that she did not miss much of steering the roadster into a deep ditch.

"I wish I could always understand you, Barbie, but I can't. Sometimes I know exactly what you mean and agree; and then again I wonder if you really and truly know what you are talking about. I wish I could understand you now, but I can't."

"I don't expect you to, Mark. I know I see things

differently than lots of people; Patricia often told me that, but she understands me better now, and I think you will too, some day."

CHAPTER XXXV

MARCIA'S dance was a decided success. The evening was warm and beautiful, and seemed to be a night for youth and happiness.

"Oh, Mark, are you sure my hair looks all right? And is my nose shiny?" Barbara had just met her cousin in the reception room of the Vandetour.

"That's the third time you've asked me that this evening, Barbie, dear." Marcia hugged her cousin closely and then with her hands on Barbara's shoulder, and looking straight into her clear eyes, said, "You look wonderful, Barbie! Simply wonderful! Tell me, honey, are you happy?"

At this Barbara laughed. Tha' tinkling laugh alone, could have expressed her answer but she said, "Happy? Why, Mark, I'm so happy that I have to pinch myself to see if I'm not dreaming. Oh, it's great! I love it! And to think that you can have something like this," and Barbara glanced through the doorway to the adjoining room where the dancers were swaying to and fro, "Something like

this whenever you want it. Oh, I wouldn't have missed it for anything. It was grand of you to invite me, Mark. I could kiss you if it was't for mussing you up!"

"As if that would make any difference with me. May I see your dance program?"

"Certainly. Say, we are lucky to get a minute together."

"I should say as much. You've certainly been rushed this evening. And your program is filled! Oh honey, that's great. I'm so glad you've got to meet the gang. Here comes Billy Roe. I guess our few minutes together have come to an end."

Billy had come to claim his dance with Barbara.

"Will you please excuse me, Mark?"

"Certainly, dear. Trot right along. Take good care of her, Billy."

"Sure." And as Barbara took his arm, Billy stole a glance at the pretty, young girl who was to be his partner for one whole dance that evening—and maybe more.

Barbara wore a simple but beautiful dance frock of palest orchid tulle. The neck was cut low, but not too low for the simple modesty which seemed to enshroud her. On one shoulder a small bouquet of velvet pansies closely nestled. A flimsy orchid veil covered her shoulders. An unusually happy light was in her eyes.

"Oh, I love it, love it," Barbara said to herself, as clasped in Billy's arms, she swayed to the soft strains of music. "I love the music, the rhythm, the swaying, and even the scraping of feet. If Pat could only be here too. I wonder what she is doing. I——"

"May I have the next dance too?"

Barbara suddenly realized that Billy was softly speaking to her.

"Why, I'm sorry, but I have the next dance with Mr. Madison."

"Him? Why he can't dance, Barbie. He would only make a laughing stock of you, if he got you out on this floor."

"I really think you must be mistaken, Billy. I'm sure Mr. Madison would not have asked me to dance if he did not know how. Have you ever seen him dance?"

"No. And no one else ever has either. He's sure been keeping an eye on you since you came here."

"Billy!" Barbara's voice had quickly changed from a merry and happy tone to one of indignation.

"I'm sorry, Babs. Truly I am. I'm always bawling things up. I'll do better next time."

Both danced in silence for a few minutes and then Billy said, "You know, Barbie, you actually make me ashamed of myself sometimes."

"Why, Billy. I'm sorry. I'm sure I never meant

to do it. How could I make you ashamed? You have nothing to be ashamed about."

"Well, I'm not sorry, and I've got something to be ashamed about; just lots of things. There, that's the end of this dance and someone else will be claiming you in a minute. But before you go I want to say this, Babs: I'm just a selfish, conceited imp, and the worst of it is, I didn't know it until you showed me. Here is John Madison now. Thanks for the dance, Babs, I think I'll be going over to the club."

"It's early, Billy. Why leave so soon?"

"Reason enough. Goodnight." And he disappeared through the crowd and out into the night.

"Rather breezy young chap, don't you think, Miss Hunt?"

Barbara, who stood dumbfounded, looking at the place in the crowd where Billy had disappeared, turned and faced John Madison.

"He is certainly made of real stuff, but he's just now finding it out for himself."

"You seem to be quite a judge of character."

"Thank you. I can tell when there is any real material in a man."

"The music has started; I believe this is my dance."

Once again Barbara swayed to the music and as she had expected, John Madison was an excellent

dancer. Just before the music for the dance ceased, John Madison asked if he might see Barbara to her home.

"I am with Marcia and Mr. and Mrs. Stuart," answered Barbara.

"I have asked their permission and if you consent, Marcia and another friend will go with us in my car."

"If my uncle and aunt have given their consent and if Marcia is going also, I shall go," returned Barbara.

The evening wore on and the dance ended all too soon for Barbara. She had made a decided hit with young and old alike. She had even danced with two titled gentlemen.

As the large car drove into the Stuart's driveway, Barbara said, "You haven't told me what your invention is, or is going to be, Mr. Madison."

"I am afraid you wouldn't understand, Miss Hunt. It is an invention dealing with dynamoses."

"No, I guess I wouldn't. I know very little about machinery."

As John Madison bade Barbara goodnight he said, "You are the one who can make my invention a success. It is simple enough for you to do. Whether or not my invention is a success depends on you. Before leaving New York you are to give me your promise that you will help me."

Barbara suddenly shivered. The night was warm, but she felt chilly. Why should she suddenly feel so melancholy and serious after spending such a wonderful night at the dance?

"Goodnight, Miss Hunt."

"Goodnight, and thank you very much."

"Well, did you enjoy yourself?" queried Marcia as the two went to their rooms.

"A perfectly gorgeous time, honey. I shall never forget it. It doesn't seem possible that you are soon to go abroad."

"No, I can hardly realize it either, but I can hardly wait now that the time is so near when I am to leave. Who knows but what I can soon realize my ambition—a studio and working on my own. I saw Alice Grey talking to you this evening."

"Yes, she said that she had a big surprise for you and the rest of the gang, just before she leaves for Europe."

"A surprise? Whatever could it be? Did she give you any hint?"

"Not one. She said that if the surprise was a success, she'd have made the last two months worth while."

"Why she has been in the South for the last two months. I wonder what the surprise could ever be?"

Barbara recalled that Alice Grey had been in Bradford the last two weeks of those two months,

and maybe longer. She was in some way connected with those two strange women, who lived near Mrs. Bronson. And now Alice said she had a surprise that had come up in the last two months. If Barbara had known some of the things that Sheriff Mason knew concerning the two strange women living near Mrs. Bronson, and Alice Grey herself, she would have been more surprised and puzzled than she was now.

"Say!" she suddenly exclaimed. "I must write to Pat, Mother and Mrs. Bronson, and tell them everything about the dance. I promised them I would, and then I almost forgot."

"Let's sleep together tonight, Barbie. I want to talk to you lots."

"That suits me fine. I hear someone talking low. I wonder if Uncle Rand and Aunt Katherine have returned yet."

"Yes, they have. I don't hear anyone talking anyway."

"I don't either now. I thought I did a while ago."

Barbara wrote a long letter to Patricia, telling her everything about the dance and what a wonderful time she had. She told her about John Madison and after hesitating a few minutes, she wrote what he had said about her helping to make his invention a success. She asked Patricia if she could think of how she could make an invention concerning a

dynamo a success. Barbara also wrote to her friend all that she knew about Alice Grey. She then wrote to her mother and then to Mrs. Bronson.

After finishing her letter-writing, Barbara retired, and she and Marcia talked on into the night until at last they both dropped to sleep with happy smiles covering their faces.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE next few days were spent in perfect enjoyment. There were parties, dances, teas, dinners, theatres, shopping, golfing, swimming and an endless number of invitations for Marcia Stuart and her charming cousin.

Several days after Marcia's dance Barbara received a letter from Patricia which read:

Dear Babsy:

We didn't get to go camping as we expected, but I guess that it is best that we didn't.

Things sure have been happening fast since you left and what do you suppose—but I guess I should start at the beginning.

"I know you have been having a lovely time, but you certainly have missed some action. It seems

that Sheriff Mason has had no small suspicion of those two women who live next to Mrs. Bronson. Well, when he returned to Bradford after losing trace of Joan Warren, he started an investigation that landed the two women in the jail with Sam. These are the things which we have found out. I say "We" because Yours Truly has been doing no small amount of cross-examination, et cetera. Now for the facts:

1. The two women are the confederates of Joan Warren and her chauffeur. A few days after Mrs. Warren's escape with Matilda Bronson's oil stock, she and the chauffeur were back in the house with their two women confederates. That means that they gave Sheriff Mason the slip and while he was turning New York inside out looking for them, they were on their way back to Bradford.

2. They (the two women) deny the fact that Sam is one of their confederates. Your theory about there being two gangs after the black box seems to be correct. Sam will not talk and eats barely enough to keep himself alive. I'm going to see if I can't get him to talk to me this afternoon.

3. Sometime ago, Sheriff Mason discovered a tunnel leading from Mrs. Bronson's basement to that of the house where the two women lived. That may have been the way that Sam made his escape after stealing the black box. Last but not least,

Barbie, Mr. Mason says that the young girl who was staying with the two women is mixed up in the case some way! Are you certain, Barbie that the Alice Grey you told me about in your letter is the girl who was in Bradford? Why don't you question her? It would do no harm, and we simply must grasp every possible clue. If you were only here, I could really talk to you and we could work together on this mystery. How soon are you coming home? I'm certainly glad that Marcia's dance was a success and that you had such a nice time.

If anything more develops, I'll let you know. Please question this Alice Grey and then write to me what she says.

Mrs. Bronson told me yesterday evening that she was going to write to you.

Love,

Your pal,

PAT.

Barbara read the letter over and over again and then re-read it aloud to her cousin. One thing she was determined to do, and that was to question Alice Grey. Barbara was positive that she was the girl that she had seen in Bradford, and that she could tell much about the black boxes and the disappearance of Donald Bronson.

"Why," Barbara asked of her cousin, "Didn't I think to question Alice before?"

"You didn't know before that the two women or the girl either had anything to do with the mystery."

"That is true. Do you know when I could see Alice?"

"I should think tomorrow afternoon would be the best time. Alice has asked us over several times, so we can accept the invitation tomorrow."

"What would be the best way to go about questioning her?"

"You don't really think Alice is mixed up in it—that she is guilty of any part of the stealing, do you?" asked Marcia in surprise.

After a few minutes Barbara spoke, "I do not know if she is guilty of anything or not, but I do know that Alice Grey is the girl who Sheriff Mason believes to have something to do with this affair. Alice may have been there for the most innocent purpose, but why did she pretend to be in the South? Sheriff Mason must have some cause to believe that she has something to do with it."

"That is right too. It is hard to say what cause Alice may have had for deceiving everyone into thinking she was in the South, but the best thing to do is to have a straight, frank talk with her."

"It is such a mystery." Barbara uttered a sigh. "What has Diane Pemburton and her murder to do

with the disappearance of Mrs. Bronson's box and other facts that we know? Every time I think of Diane Pemburton, I shudder. The lips that could probably name the murderer and clear up the rest of this mystery, have been closed by death. Why was she after the box belonging to Mrs. Bronson? Why was she dressed in Donald Bronson's clothing? What has become of Donald Bronson? Oh, Mark, I could go mad when I think of so many questions and no way to answer them. I can imagine Pat is doing her best to help Sheriff Mason."

Marcia moved nearer to Barbara and put her arm about her in close companionship. Taking Barbara's hand in her own she said, "I wish I could help you, Barbie. And—and I will. I don't suppose there is anything that a girl like me could do to help one as practical as you are, but I'll try. You've changed a good many of my opinions and ideas since that first day I met you at the train and I'll always remember it. All of my life I have had friends, but, honey, you've made me wonder if they are all true friends. If my father was to lose his wealth and position, and I were forced to work, I mean really labor for a living, like so many other girls, I wonder how many of my present friends would stick by me then. As it is, I am as carefree and frivolous as the rest; and we hold open house at the country place during the entire summer months, and I as-

sociate with the gang every day, but how many of them could stand the test of true friendship? I love them all, but they don't understand things as you do, Barbie. I'm ashamed to even compare myself with you. You have a record of many worth while things that you have accomplished in your life, while I have not. But where could I start? How should I start? You know, Barbie. Please tell me what I should do first."

Barbara was crying. She thought she had troubles of her own just at present but here was a girl who had more, and was asking for help. The two girls cried together, laughed together, and then indulged in earnest conversation.

"I want to say first, Mark, that you have one real friend among all the light-hearted ones. A friend that holds you as an example and who values each of your opinions. He is one who will never forget you."

"Who is that?"

"And you really don't know?"

Marcia thought for a few minutes, weighing and judging the character of each of her friends. "I give up, Babs. I can't think of anyone who would value my opinions."

"If you don't honestly know, I will tell you. You remember the morning that we went shopping and then took lunch down town?"

"Why, yes."

"You introduced one of your friends to me—
Freddy Harper."

Marcia slightly caught her breath. "You mean that Freddy is the real friend you were speaking of?"

"Yes. Freddy is your true friend and always will be."

"But he is like all the rest, Barbie. He has money and doesn't care to work and—and he too is missing the best things in life. I'm sorry, dear, but you have misjudged a character there."

"Where is Freddy?" Barbara asked the question pointedly.

"Why, I don't know."

"He didn't tell you where he was going? You haven't the slightest idea where he is?"

"Not the slightest."

"Well, I have. I think perhaps Freddy is somewhere seeking work. He is taking your advice and is trying to make use of his ambition."

Marcia closing her arms about her cousin, embraced her. "Oh, Babs, if you are only right. If it is only true."

"Would it make so very much difference to you if Freddy succeeds?"

Marcia held Barbara the full length of her arms

away from her and laughing said, "Yes it would, Babs. It would make a world of difference."

A maid entered the library and handing Barbara a telegram announced, "A telegram for Miss Hunt."

"A telegram?" Nervously Barbara opened the envelope. As her eyes quickly scanned the paper, Barbara's face first flushed a feverish red and then turned pale.

"What is it?" queried Marcia who thought that something might have happened to Barbara's mother.

"Oh, Mark, I must see Alice Grey immediately and then as soon as possible go home."

"What has happened?"

"This telegram is from Patricia and it says that Donald Bronson is home safe and I must come immediately! Oh, Mark, I can hardly believe it. She doesn't say how he got there or what had happened to him or anything, but he's there, and I have no time to waste."

Barbara, who was usually cool and calm was now nervous and unable to control herself. Marcia took the situation quickly in hands and said, "I'll call Alice on the 'phone right away and tell her we are coming over. Hurry and get ready. I'll tell Gerald to have the car ready and then I must explain to Mother, too."

The girls hurried and were soon starting for the home of Alice Grey.

CHAPTER XXXVII

"GOODBYE, Babsy. Goodbye, Alice. Wire us how everything turns out." Marcia waved her handkerchief to the two girls who were leaving for Bradford.

Barbara thanked her uncle and aunt the sixth time for the pleasant time she had had. As the train left the station, three people were standing on the platform, tears of happiness streaming down the faces of two of them.

When Barbara and Marcia made their call on Alice Grey, Barbara had lost no time in explaining her purpose in calling. Alice was so surprised that she was unable to speak for a while after Barbara had finished her explanation. When she recovered from her surprise, Alice made a long explanation telling exactly what part she had taken in the mystery of the black box. It was decided that Alice should go with Barbara to Bradford. Barbara wired her mother that she and Alice were coming. Now, the two girls were well on their way to Bradford where they expected to help clear up the mystery.

Needless to say, there was a happy reunion upon Barbara's arrival in Bradford. Mrs. Hunt, Mrs. Gordon and Patricia were at the train to meet Barbara and Alice. Both Barbara and Patricia were brimming over with questions to ask each other.

"How is Mrs. Bronson?" queried Barbara on the way home.

"Just fine," answered Patricia. "You can't get her to leave Donald two minutes. She's at his bedside continually."

"At his bedside?"

"Yes," returned Patricia. "He was nearly dead when we found him. Oh, he looked terrible, Babs. He's getting along fairly well now."

"How did you find him? Where was he? What——"

"Whoa. Wait a minute. Take it a little easier and hit the bumps easy. Remember, Miss, I've got lots of questions to ask you, but we're both going to wait until we get home before we do any real explaining."

Alice merrily laughed as the girls embraced each other again.

First, Patricia asked questions about the parties, teas, and dances and then asked about Alice Grey and just how much she had to do with the plot. Barbara coyly answered that there would be no real explaining until they reached home. The suspense

was terrible to the impatient Patricia but she knew that when Barbara Hunt said "No" a team of mules couldn't move her.

That afternoon, Mrs. Hunt, Mrs. Gordon, Alice Grey, Patricia and Barbara called on Mrs. Bronson and her son. Barbara was much surprised at Donald's condition. He could speak only a few words at a time. One look at his face proved that he had been through much. He looked exactly like the picture which Joan Warren had showed Mrs. Bronson. The look in his eyes made Barbara half fear him. "Isn't it awful?" she whispered to Patricia and Alice.

"Yes," answered Patricia. "But Mrs. Bronson is so thankful that she has him back alive. He is in no condition to talk about what has happened, so we simply must wait until his condition is more favorable. I almost forgot to say, Babs, that Sam wanted to see you when you got back from your visit."

"Sam? Over at the jail?"

"Yes."

"Whatever could he want? Perhaps I should run over now and see." Turning to her mother she said, "Mother, Sam told Pat that he would like to see me, so I believe I had better go over and see what it is he wants."

"Over at the jail?" asked Mrs. Hunt.

"Yes. Do you girls want to go with me?"

"Sure," said Patricia as she jumped from her chair. "You must come too, Alice."

"Yes, and she can identify those two women while we are there," said Barbara.

"There is no time like the present," said Alice. "And the sooner it's over with the better. No doubt I can make the women talk to me, for when I tell them that we've got the goods on them, they will know that they might as well give up. About all that is lacking now is some facts that they will no doubt be able to furnish. And if Barbara finds out what Sam wants, then I believe everything will soon be completed."

The next few days were spent in visiting the jail where Sam told Barbara all that he knew about the mystery, the murder, and all who were concerned in it. The two women made their confessions to Alice and learned for the first time that Alice Grey was not a crook as they had believed.

Sheriff Mason took the information from Sam and the two women, whose names were Mary and Anna Webb, and traced Joan Warren, her accomplice; the members of the old Thayer gang and the murderer of Diane Pemberton, and had placed them in the county jail at Bradford, where they were closely guarded.

As soon as Donald Bronson's health permitted

him to stand the strain, a trial was held and the husband of Diane Pemburton was found guilty of first degree murder and sentenced to ninety-nine years' solitary imprisonment at Sing Sing prison.

John Smith and Henry Mead, who had figured largely in the kidnapping of Patricia Gordon, thought they were the only members of the Thayer gang, who were living. Buck Thayer, the ringleader, however, was still living and took it upon himself to organize new gangs of crooks. Thayer and his new band met much success and took it upon themselves to rob Matilda Bronson of her oil stock. It was planned to waylay Donald Bronson on his way home from serving his prison term, and force him to tell where the stock could be found. Donald Bronson knew the stock was safe in a bank but told Thayer that it was kept in a black box. Sam was a member of Buck Thayer's gang and it was decided that he should be the one to steal the stock.

The Thayer gang was not the only gang which was interested in the black box. Marvin Henry Blaine, alias Scottie Blaine, who was the leader of a rival gang had also set his mind on the Bronson oil stock. Mary and Anna Webb were members of the Scottie Blaine gang.

It so happened that the rival gangs planned to steal the stock on the same night. The Blaine gang, knowing this, decided to go one better on their rival

gang and to take more desperate chances. Having secured clothing belonging to Donald Bronson, Scottie Blaine forced his wife, Diane Pemburton, to wear the clothes and to secure the oil stock, no matter what might happen.

The night of the robbery Scottie Blaine accompanied his wife to the Bronson residence and kept close watch while she was to commit the robbery. From where he was looking on, Scottie Blaine saw Matilda Bronson enter the house and then giving the signal, he saw his wife raise herself to the window and he breathed a sigh of relief. It would be easy now. But Scottie Blaine was to be disappointed, for he looked down from his hiding place to see Sam of the Thayer gang enter the house. Seeing that all was not going well, Blaine moved from his hiding place. A fight between Sam and Blaine followed in which Diane Pemburton, either wishing to end her life or to hinder the fight, threw herself between the two men, and her husband sent a sharp-pointed ice-pick straight to her heart. Blaine testified that the fateful blow had been meant for the other man. Diane Pemburton, who wore heavy rubber gloves, had used her husband's revolver which bore the initials M.H.B.—Marvin Henry Blaine. Scottie, seeing that he had murdered his wife, made his escape, first making sure that he had hidden the weapon used for the murder. As Scottie was mak-

ing his escape, Matilda Bronson was bending over the form of the dead woman. Sam being nowhere in sight, Scottie took time to secure his gun, but by a queer trick of fate, his revolver was exchanged with that of Matilda Bronson.

All this time Donald Bronson was guarded so closely there was no chance for his escape.

In the meantime, Alice Grey, living in New York City, was planning to write a book dealing with crooks. She had no idea of how she might secure her material. One day she happened to mention her plans to John Madison who was then working on an invention. He explained to Alice that Matilda Bronson, of Bradford, Ohio, had some papers in her possession that had belonged to her husband and which he must have before he could complete his invention.

It was settled that very evening that John Madison would get Alice Grey in touch with the Thayer gang, providing that she secure the papers necessary to complete his invention.

The Thayer gang finding that Sam had made a mistake and secured the wrong box, made several other attempts to secure the one containing the stock.

The Scottie Blaine gang took up their headquarters in the house west of Matilda Bronson's. They too made attempts to secure the black box that was thought to contain the oil stock. The other mem-

bers of the gang thought Alice Grey to be a crook and used her as a blind.

When Sheriff Mason's investigations grew too thorough, Scottie Blaine and the men of his gang deserted Anna and Mary Webb. Donald Bronson then attempted to make his escape but in his weakened condition he was unable to travel far, when he fell by the roadside. A farmer found him and upon learning his identity immediately notified the sheriff who brought him to his home in Bradford.

As the sentence of Marvin Henry Blaine was read, a deathlike hush fell over the well-filled court room. Here had been tragedy, here had been pathos, and now the penalty must be paid.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

"WELL, I wish you would stop talking long enough to read that letter. I can hear you talk any time or any day, but I can't always hear you read a letter from your New York cousin." After making this harsh speech Patricia patted Barbara on the back and then said, "I didn't mean it, honey, but I do want to hear that letter. You came over to read it to Mrs. Bronson, Donald and me, so shoot!"

"All right, here goes. 'Dearest Barbie,'" she read, "'You certainly judged Freddy Harper's character tiptop. He's landed quite a responsible position and is making good.

" 'I'm not going to Europe as I expected, 'cause I can't afford it, but I'm opening my little studio right here in New York, and am starting on my own. After Freddy and I save enough money we are going to be life-long partners and can then help each other with our careers.

" 'I was certainly glad to hear that everything turned out all right at the trial.

" 'Alice will no doubt tell you, but I have the chance first—her book is a success and is to be published sometime in March. Isn't that grand?

" 'Mother and Dad send their love and please tell everyone "Hello" for me. Your loving cousin, Mark.' "

"Um, that was nice about their being life-long partners, wasn't it?" queried Patricia, and without waiting for a reply, she added thoughtfully, "The black box has brought good luck, bad luck, sorrow, and now it brings happiness."

THE END



